FICTION



"I will give him the key to the house of David—the highest position in the royal court. When he opens doors, no one will be able to close them; when he closes doors, no one will be able to open them" (Isaiah 22:22 NLT).

If you had something to tell someone that could change their life forever in a great way, would you tell them, no matter what the impact to you? Jordan told Adam and David but they wouldn't listen and now it is too late, that door is closed forever. It is my hope that as you read *And Then Comes Justice*, you will be encouraged to share the things that matter most in life with your family and friends, and in all of the relationships whose door is opened to you.

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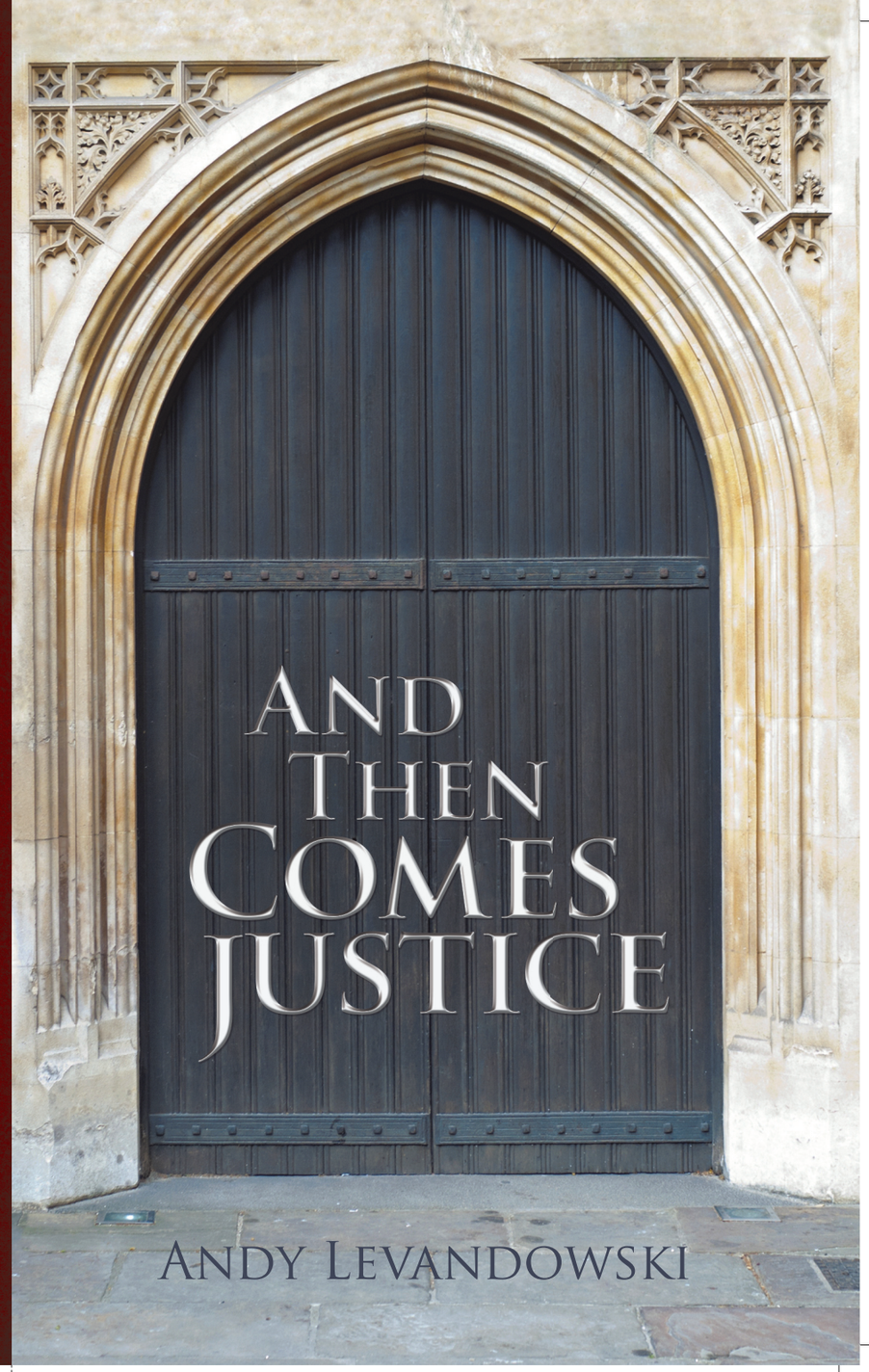
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ANDY LEVANDOWSKI

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And Then Comes Justice

Andy Levandowski



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Dedication

I dedicate this book to
my lovely bride and best friend.
Without God, I am nothing.
Without you, I am incomplete.

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Prologue

ONCE AGAIN SHARI SAT ALONE on the plane during the long flight for her annual executive meeting in London. She loved travelling to London, but she hated leaving her husband behind. Per his request, she would take many pictures and would FaceTime with him from her hotel and various places around the city. But, traveling just wasn't the same without him.

She smiled as she looked out the window closest to her seat, knowing that if her husband were with, he would have his face plastered against it during the entire flight. But her smile faded as she sat there looking out the window. As usual, three hours into the flight, Shari started to feel restless and her legs started to ache. She looked at her watch and sighed, "Six more hours."

Working very hard the day before, she was well prepared for her presentation. So, she didn't feel like getting into work mode just yet, and it was too soon to take a nap. She thought about watching a movie, but then she remembered that her husband slipped

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something into her bag when he dropped her off at the airport. She pulled her bag out from under the seat and looked inside. “His book,” she said aloud. After reading the title, her eyes were drawn to the bottom of the cover. She read his name, smiled, and then turned the page.

She began to read;

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Jordan's Witness

"AN INCH TO THE LEFT, and I would have come to this dismal place alone."

"Yes, almost, but not quite," Adam said unemotionally.

David was speaking in terms that Adam understood and would usually be quite passionate to discuss. But today was not a normal day. Today was a day of mourning. Adam spent his entire life talking in terms of luck and balance. Because to him, every part of the human life experience was a scientific clear cut formula that boiled down to a progression of chances and coincidence.

To Adam, there were no absolutes, and there certainly was no destiny. Not for him, not for anyone. We were all part of Mother Earth's pond of goo that was governed by an equal balance of Ying and Yang, good and bad, right and righter, and life and death. If Adam were sure about anything, he knew that you couldn't have one without the other. And

unfortunately for Adam and David, Mother Earth was recently busy playing in her pond.

In his typical, Adam-like way of responding to his friend, David, he told him, "Although, I don't think you can describe this place as dismal, David. There is too much *happiness* here for it to be dismal." Adam paused for effect, and then continued with, "And yet, dismal, sorrowful, happy, or surreal; I really don't care. We've been over all this before. It doesn't matter if it was an inch or if it completely missed me, the outcome is the outcome, and I don't want to talk about it—not today."

"Well, I might not always come up with the best 'word' as you, Sir Adam, but at least I don't sound like a snob. Stop correcting everyone. There are no cameras around. No fans. Not here, not today. Besides, it makes you sound pompous my pseudo celebrity friend. And if you want to talk about it or not, an inch to the left is all I'm saying. An inch. One inch."

Adam brought up an eyebrow and thought about commenting on his friends' accusations of him being a wordsmith, but he decided differently. Instead, both men grinned and then laughed briefly. After all, David was right; being there was not what either of the men (nor anyone else for that matter) would want to do on any given day.

However, for Adam and David, this was especially true knowing that amongst the Montgomery's other friends, in their minds, Adam and David stuck out

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like a couple of oddballs. But, oddballs or not, they didn't have much of a choice. They had been friends with Jordan, the man that they loved to call Cast, for what seemed to be forever. They owed it to Cast to be there, even if it was the very place that they said they would never go, a place that they would rather be caught dead in; Jordan's church.

Sadly, and quite ironically, it took the death of their friend to break their promise to Jordan to set foot in his church. Nevertheless, for this reason and this reason alone, they had to put their feelings and 'non-beliefs' aside for the love of their friend. Not being there for him or Janice wasn't even a conceivable thought.

Adam laughed again as he asked David if he remembered why they started calling Jordan, Cast.

"Sure, I remember. It was because he fell off of his roof and almost died; you goof." David paused briefly to study his friend. "You know, for someone that is so smart, and admired by millions… you sure can be quite absent minded sometimes."

Adam scrunched his eyebrows and smirked at his friend as he thought, "David can be so simple minded sometimes."Then he smiled, as he addressed David, "Yes, of course I remember. It was a rhetorical question that was meant only as a means for discussion." Adam visibly nervous looking continued with, "I don't know about you, but this place gives me the creeps."

David looked at Adam inquisitively about a

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rhetorical question, but quickly shifted his face to that of understanding, they both felt out of place and were getting nervous. If the other guests singled the two men out to chat with, they might bring up the god conversation that Jordan was so fond of doing, particularly during awkward moments like memorial services.

Adam thought it was best to keep talking, "It was the funniest thing to see Jordan lying in that bush with his legs straight up in the air. I can still see that branch sticking out of his pants. I swear that if it were Halloween, it would have looked like he was pretending that the bush monster was trying to eat him."

David replied, "Sure. Funny for you, funny for me, but poor Cast couldn't sit down for three months after that. And besides, he could have broken his neck. Hmm, I reckon that would have meant that this day would have happened, what, 12 years ago."

Adam mused, "12 years…"

Once again the memory of their friend made the two men grin, but their grins disappeared at the instant Janice walked into the room. Janice was a very attractive woman and always looked a lot younger than her age. She didn't know Adam and David as well as Jordan, after all they were his project, no, not project she would often remind herself, they were his friends.

Both men said simultaneously, "Janice," as they nodded politely in her direction.

"Oh, shame on you two," Janice said as she

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mockingly scolded them. "You know very well that Jordan wouldn't have you two acting like you were at a wake; above all his."

Her laugh that followed made both men wince. But then the three of them laughed together. This brought the attention of several others nearby, but nobody dared to question the new widow.

"How are you holding up?" asked David.

Janice glanced at Adam's bandage on his neck.

"I suppose it could be worse. There could be two coffins in that room, or three."

David nodded, and Adam just stared off into the next room. Janice started to say, "An inch…" but couldn't finish the sentence, which suited Adam just fine.

"So, exactly what were you two gentlemen, I mean, clowns laughing about when I walked in?"

David responded, "We were recalling how Jordan got his nickname."

All three nodded in agreement as they said, "Cast."

"Ouch, just thinking about it makes me remember how he had to lay face down on our sofa for three weeks. And oh, did he milk it even after he could sit and walk again. It was getting to the point that I was going to have the doctor write me a note saying that Jordan could get off the sofa and start using his reconstructed tush so that he could start doing things around the house again."

As she pointed her finger toward them, Janice continued, "And you two weren't any help. Laughing

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and carrying on like you were. You didn't have to see that branch sticking into his… Well, let's just say that it wasn't a pretty sight in the ER."

Adam and David started to protest, but supposed it wouldn't do much good. Janice was right; they even played a role in his lengthy recovery by getting their friend laughing so hard that he tore out three stitches on two separate occasions.

"Whatever happened to that bush anyway?" asked David.

"Oh, so you were saying that I had a bad memory. Come on, Sir David, don't you remember what happened to Ms. Hatti's window?"

"Oh man, that's right. The end of that chain went flying about 200 feet if it went an inch…" David stopped in mid sentence and looked up at Adam's neck. "Sorry…, bad analogy. But that was crazy, wasn't it?"

"It certainly was," agreed Adam.

Janice also agreed, but then added, "Yeah, crazy expensive. I think we just finished paying off her replacement picture window. It was a good thing she is a member at our church. Otherwise, we might have had to sell one of our children, or at least hire them off somewhere."

"Yikes," stated Adam. "That's harsh coming from someone like, well, you know; like you."

Adam was referring to the fact that Janice and Jordan were what most people would call, 'religious'. Although, they preferred to call what they had a relationship, not a religion. This meant absolutely

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nothing to Adam. David, however, having grown up as a non-practicing Catholic, had an inkling of what that meant, but never cared too much about it one way or another. His standard answer was, 'When God wants to talk to me, he knows where to find me.' In this regard, Adam and David were quite similar. They never gave religion or a god much thought because both men were successful in their respected careers and had no need for a deity to tell them what to do or how to act. But other than they both didn't have a need for a god, the two men were very different from one another.

Adam was outgoing, intelligent, tall and slim like Jordan. David was not as intelligent as his two friends, but considered himself to be street smart. He was more on the rounded side, not exactly overweight or chubby, but built solid and a lot shorter. Adam had a head full of black hair. And if all went well for him, he would end up like his father who had a full head of hair, his entire life, and without one gray hair among them. Jordan wasn't as fortunate in the hair department. He began to lose his hair in his mid thirties.

And though David could have had hair if he wanted, he preferred the clean shaved head look; a look that he had ever since his high school football playing years. He would tell people that he was trying to look like Telly Savalas, but most people didn't know who that was when he told them. He would say to them, "You know, Kojak" but that would get even more blank stares. Eventually, he stopped telling people this.

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It was Jordan that introduced David to his childhood friend, Adam. And though they didn't have many things in common, Jordan being the glue to their friendship was all that was needed. It was perhaps being so different from one another made it possible for them to be friends. And over the years, the three of them became close.

Adam and Jordan grew up across the street from one another and went to the same schools all the way up to junior college. After that, Jordan went to work for his father and Adam continued on with his schooling. He was determined to be on TV. Adam knew that he had the intelligence and the charisma to do it if he set his mind to it. So he did, and he did end up on television. He didn't have a career that he always dreamed of. But even so, the weekend weatherman or rather, the weekend 'Meteorologist', Adam would correct anyone that disrespected his proper title, makes a decent salary for their area. Certainly, Adam was one of the most successful of his graduating class at Wausau West High School, in central Wisconsin, and thus always loved to make an appearance at reunions.

Jordan, likewise never missed a reunion, but for an altogether different reason. He wasn't out to impress his classmates, though being part owner of a boat restoration business that his father and friend started many years ago was no small potatoes compared to many of his classmates.

Jordan always claimed that his attending the reunions were an opportunity to fish and plant

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seeds. This never made too much sense to David, being that he couldn't ever recall a time of Jordan bringing any fishing gear or seed for that matter to any of Jordan or Adam's reunions. But Adam knew exactly what he meant.

Growing up, David's family couldn't afford a fancy television to watch local celebrities such as weathermen. Instead, his family had to make do with an old console TV that someone was throwing out because everyone always looked too green or red, depending on the channel or day of the week. However, David saw being poor as opportunities. He would say that there were always doors to riches that were ready to be opened if you had the right mindset and if you knew where to look. That kind of thinking paid off for David. He was every bit as wealthy cleaning pools of the town's elite class as Adam was for forecasting the weekend weather and providing the viewers with the latest scoop on unwanted puppies and kittens.

However, the possibility of David cleaning Adam's pool was never brought up. They both knew it would put a strain on their friendship. And since Jordan and Janice didn't have a pool, it was all good for the three men to talk about anything else, including the weather and an occasional plea from Jordan for his friends to join him at a men's breakfast.

Adam and David would joke that they barely liked eating breakfast with their families let alone a bunch of men talking about 'relationships'.

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As things wound down at the wake, those that came to show their respect started to file out, leaving only immediate family and some of Jordan's closest friends. And though Adam and David could be listed among Jordan's closest friends, they felt that the fewer people there, the bigger target they became for someone to seek out and talk to them about God, so they said their final goodbyes to Janice.

"We will miss him," Adam said absently to Janice.

"Yes, we will," David agreed. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with this *pseudo celebrity* now that Jordan won't be here to referee our arguments."

"Ha, arguments. That would mean that two intelligent people were experiencing an intellectual debate." As Adam was saying this, he gave David a push toward the doorway. David started to protest the unwarranted comment and push from his friend, but Adam kept pushing him along, and out the door they went. Except for spotting Adam on television from time to time, it was the last time Janice saw either of the two men.

Despite Adam's desire to avoid talking about the accident, the two friends agreed to meet at Noel's Diner for breakfast the following day.

"Morning weatherman."

"Pool boy."

"You forgot handsome. That's handsome pool boy to you kind sir."

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"Ah, sure. You keep telling yourself that baldy."

"Haven't you ever heard that bald is beautiful?"

The two friends went through the routine of bantering and small talk as they ordered and ate their breakfast. Afterward, David changed the subject to the accident, "Well, we might as well talk about the pink elephant in the room."

"Pink elephant? Who's drunk? Oh, you mean, we should talk about the elephant in the room, as in, the reason why we come here this morning."

After David's clever comeback of, "Smarty pants" Adam obliged and went along as they discussed the accident that led to the wound on his neck and yesterdays' celebration of life, as one of Jordan's church friends had called it.

"As I was resting in bed last night thinking, I questioned, if Cast was so fond of his god and was so involved in his church, why did he die and not one of us?"

"So what are you saying? Bad things only happen to sinners (followed by a chuckle) like you and me? And that the church going faithful escapes such tragedies? Everyone dies, Sir David. Everyone. You, me, Cast, everyone."

"Yeah, but shouldn't religious people die of old age or something noble, like fighting in a war, helping some old lady cross the street, or something like that?"

"Wouldn't that be nice? Then my god-fearing nephew wouldn't have had to die at such a young

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age while fighting in Afghanistan, so that guys like you and me can eat breakfast peacefully in nice dives like this."

Kyle, the ease dropping cook and owner of the diner poked his head through the serving window and stuck out his tongue at Adam.

Adam returned the gesture, then sat back and watched a young couple pay their bill and went out the door. He watched them cross the parking lot and get into a gold Honda Civic with a fish symbol on the bumper, similar to the one Jordan had on his car. Overhead, Patsy Clines, *Crazy* was playing.

"Come on Adam, you know what I mean," pleaded David.

"You come on. You know very well that I don't worry about such matters. Life is a game of chance, and when you roll the dice and snake eyes is gleaming back at you, well you better pack your bags and say your good-byes." Adam said this a little too cold for David, making him flinch slightly as he sat there listening to his friend. Adam saw this, but ignored it and continued, "I'm here on this planet and will remain on this planet until it is my turn to feed the daisy fields. Then I'll be gone, and some other poor sap will be forecasting the weekend weather and reminding everyone that pets don't use birth control."

David asked, "And then what?"

"And then nothing. I return to the pond of goo like everyone else," barked Adam.

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"So then all this time that Jordan tried to convince us that his god was real and that there was an afterlife was just a waste of his time? You never once looked at the possibility that Cast might be right?"

"No! You?"

David lied, "Of course not. So, with this phony religious stuff aside, what do you think spared our lives, especially yours since one of the nails hit you right in the neck and missing your jugular by an inch."

"Come on, David! Quit being so naive. Think about what you're asking me here. Like I told you, in that respect, there is no fate. No one controls your destiny. No God. No afterlife. There is only what you see and do on this rock for the seventy to eighty some years that you're here, and that is it. Back to Mother Earth's pond of goo ready for the next pond scum to crawl out to spend their given time here and so on, and so on, and so on. Period."

"So what you're saying is, if I stood where Cast was when the lithium battery exploded you two would have been at my wake yesterday and not his?"

"Yup. Except for in your case, to honor you, I would have showed up at the wake in flippers and a snorkel; not a suit."

"Now that, I would love to see. It's too bad that I would have to be dead to see it though."

After the two friends laugh at the thought of Adam walking around a wake wearing flippers,

they continued to talk for a long time to describe the events of the accident.

On the morning of the accident, Jordan arrived at the warehouse first. Jordan was tasked with the exploration of an empty warehouse. He was asked by his church to see if would be feasible to renovate the old building for their new teen recreation center.

Initially, it was just going to be Jordan and David because of David's handy man, jack of all trades ability to assess the expenses for a remodeling project such as the undertaking of the old warehouse.

However, on the night before Jordan and David's assessment, Adam stopped by with his oldest son Ethan to check out Jordan's propeller collection. And though he openly ribbed his friend's geeky collection of airplane and boat propellers, he secretly liked the enormous undertaking, time, and passion it took to collect anything.

Having a collection of his own was something that Adam thought he would not be able to do because he was afraid to follow in his parents hoarding footsteps. He often threw out things one week and ended up replacing it the very next week.

Although, at times he would wonder what he would like to collect if he thought he could do so without making it an obsession. He imagined that it would most likely have something to do with meteorology and not something odd like a propeller collection.

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Yet, there was something about holding a three pound single engine airplane propeller blade in your hands, knowing that during a flight, it is spinning more than 2000 RPM's and is one of four elements keeping you from falling back to the earth.

When Adam thought about it most, what he truly liked about the propeller collection was it kept his friends interest in something other than his faith. To Adam, Jordan spent too much time on imaginary things like gods, and not enough time doing things that matter in life like giving people advice how to live their lives, which was the real reason for the visit with his son.

Adam lied to his son and told Ethan that he wanted him to see the collection because of the story behind one particular boat propeller that Jordan happened upon when their families vacationed together back when they were seniors in high school. But he secretly wanted Jordan to tell Ethan another story; one that might talk some sense into his son.

Adam knew that while Ethan learned about propellers and boats he would also discover how unforgiving the water can be. It would help Ethan see how dangerous the career that he was about to get himself into, and all for a girl. Not that he would entirely forbid his son to go into marine biology, he just didn't see the future that Ethan saw. Adam's pride led him to think that careers take a lot of time and money and hopefully last a lifetime, but pretty girls come and go.

Since nobody knew more about boats than his

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friend Jordan, he ended up at his home on the night before the accident.

As Adam listened to Jordan retell one of the familiar stories to his son, recalling all of the details of a life lived long ago, Adam was busy thinking about Ethan's interest in a pretty girl that was leading him to a useless career.

When the story was over, Adam chimed in, "Ever since Ethan watched that movie in school about dolphins, he wanted to pursue a career as a whale saver. Only, I imagine it also has something to do with a girl named McKenzie." Not wanting this opportunity to slip away, Adam continued, "Hey Jordan, tell Ethan about the time you went scuba diving in Lake Pontchartrain."

Jordan looked startled at first when he thought of his near death experience, thinking that it would be too scary to tell Ethan. But then he saw the look in his friend's eyes and got the hint. It totally made sense to Jordan. This was all about trying to talk his son out of doing something he loved. He wondered to himself, "Why do fathers always think they know what's best for their children when it comes to things like career choices?"

Nevertheless, for the sake of his friendship he obliged and told the story of his diving accident. Interesting enough, when he finished his story, it seemed to spark Ethan's interest in marine biology all the more.

Ethan pointed to his father and said, "See? Things like that are what I would like to work on. No one

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should ever have to live through an experience like that."

Adam shook his head as if he were trying to get rid of cobwebs as he thought, "Well, so much for that idea."

Jordan just smiled.

"How did you become interested in collecting propellers Mr. Montgomery?"

"Well, being named after a famous river, I guess I was just kind of drawn to boats. And the more that I learned about them, the more I was intrigued with learning how they worked. I was fascinated by the fact that such a small thing like a rudder can be used to guide a huge vessel. Back in the Bible days, boats didn't have propellers, but they did have rudders, and boats still use them today. However, as I soon found out, propellers and propeller blades are much easier to come by and usually many times lighter. So, I figured that since both are equally as important to the boat, and later I discovered that the same was for airplanes, why not collect them instead. And that is what led me to decide to see how many different propellers or blades that I could find, and restore if needed. So that one day, a day such as this, I could share my love for boats and planes. And together we could appreciate the wonders of how such a small thing can mean so much to a huge thing such as a ship."

Knowing where this was leading, Adam placed his arm around Ethan, "Aren't you glad you asked

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that now? Just be thankful that he gave you the short answer. The old man must be getting tired of telling the long, extremely detailed, and equally as boring explanation that he told me when I made the mistake of asking that question years ago."

Ethan smiled at his dad and then to Mr. Montgomery.

Jordan smiled back and said, "It's nice to know that you remembered Adam."

Jordan winked at Ethan and said, "And it's nice getting speaking advice from a man that makes a living telling people it's time to put on a coat when it is cold outside."

Ethan added, "And don't forget to spade and neuter your pets." Laughing, Ethan and Mr. Montgomery shared a fist bump.

As the night went on, a thought occurred to Jordan, "Hey Adam, David and I are going on a recon mission tomorrow to check out an old warehouse. My church is interested in turning it into a teen center. What do you say that you come with and bring Ethan along, so that we can get a teens perspective. Afterward, we can get some lunch, and I'll tell another boat story or perhaps I could tell him about the time his dad ended up in the ER after an attempt to impress some pretty girls went south."

"Oh, no… no more stories are needed my friend, especially that one," Adam said smiling.

Ethan said, "That sounds fun. I'd love to come

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with, and even more would like to hear that story about my dad, but the girl that my dad is so excited about me hooking up with is coming over to work on our home economics project."

"Home economics?" asked Jordan looking from father to son and back to Adam.

"Don't get me started," Adam said gruffly. (Ethan smiled at his dad as if the two were enjoying an inside joke.)

"Well, that's too bad that you can't make it. Maybe if there is a second visit, you can tag along."

"Sounds great, Mr. Montgomery."

Jordan turned to Adam, "You're still invited my friend; that is, unless you have to help out with Ethan's project."

Adam wouldn't give Jordan the satisfaction of responding to his ribbing, simply responded, "Sure. That is, if the lunch offer still stands."

"Lunch with a weatherman… how could I pass that up?" Jordan shot back.

"On that note son, let's get you home so you can get the rest you need for the project."

Ethan looked up at Mr. Montgomery and winked, Jordan smiled and nodded. The two shared another fist bump before he and his father went home.

The following morning, Adam, was next to arrive at the warehouse. Jordan wanted to ask him why he wanted to discourage his son into going into marine biology, but David's car pulled up and with it the opportunity to ask was gone. Jordan

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thought that he would perhaps get on the subject some other day. But thanks to the accident, that day never came.

"Oh, if I would have known that Mr. Weatherman was coming along, I would have brought my autograph book," David said laughing.

"You know what you can do with that book, don't you?" replied Adam.

"All right fellows, let's play nice, or I'll start reading my Bible aloud."

Both men said together, "No, no, anything but that."

With that, the three friends entered the warehouse.

Now, a little more than five days after the fist bumps between Ethan and Jordan, the wound was still healing on Adam's neck. Healing would come; slow, but eventually it would come. Although, the scar on Adam's neck would be a constant reminder of the tragedy, that took the life of his friend.

Adam rubbing his hand on his neck said to David, "In all of this, I am so relieved that Ethan was not able to go with us. The idea of losing my son in the same bizarre way that killed Cast is unbearable. How could somebody be so careless to leave a lithium battery plugged into a live outlet for who knows how long. It's not right that our friend died because of someone's lack of common sense."

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David wanted to push back and challenge Adam's logic. How could he say that there was no such thing as fate and yet be afraid that he almost lost his son? But he knew that he would lose that argument to someone like Adam. So he let it pass and commented, "I think common sense is an oxymoron. There is no such thing as 'common' sense because that would imply that many people have it, and I assure you that is not the case. Not in our day and age."

"I agree."

"The fact that your son wasn't there and the flying debris struck Jordan dead center in the forehead, you in the neck, and me, not at all is a big coincidence. Right?"

"Now you're talking logically. That is all it is. No god, no destiny, just pure old fashioned, coincidence."

"Yes, I guess I'm starting to agree with you more and more on that point," David lied again.

Adam looked dumbfounded at his friend's admission of 'starting to believe', and yet, it satisfied his hunches that David believed in Jordan's preaching. The temptation was too great to pass up on the opportunity to call his friend out. "Ah-ha, so you do believe in Jordan's god theory!" Declared Adam a little too over the top.

David stammered, "Well… well, I was brought up Catholic. And, um, well you know that sort of rubs off on you over time."

Adam raised his hand to silence his friend. "What else don't I know about you? You don't believe in aliens, do you?"

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"Maybe not aliens, but I do think zombies are real," David said sheepishly.

"Well, duh, of course *they* are real. Everyone knows that zombies are real. But seriously, how close were you, are you, in buying into this god business?" pressed Adam.

"For the most part, I really don't believe that there is an all powerful god." This time David was telling the truth. "It's just like I said, if you live long enough with a smoker, you just might start smoking yourself. And between my mom, dad, and Cast, well… it just kind of got me wondering from time to time. That's all. But that, my friend, is why I have you. You keep me grounded in reasonable thought. Truth be told; I always looked up to your intellect and thought you had a good head on your shoulders. Now of course, now that I have said that to you, I would forever have to deny saying it."

"Your secret is safe with me. Besides, why wouldn't you look up to me? My fans and the jokers in this dive look up to me. I'm tall," boasted Adam.

This last comment by Adam earned him another appearance in the serving window by Kyle, but this time the gesture that he offered Adam wasn't his tongue.

David grinned and shook his head as he scolded Adam, "Big dummy is what you are. Oh, and speaking of you, being a dummy, I think that I recall a certain weatherman…"

Adam raised his eyebrow and began to correct David, "Met…" but David quickly continued.

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"…say that it was supposed to be sunny today. Perhaps I have been watching the wrong channel all of these years."

"Wait. What? Are you a regular viewer? I thought that you always told me you watch channel nine. So another truth comes out. I'm beginning to believe that I don't know you at all pool boy."

"Don't change the subject. Where is the sun you promised?" bantered David.

"That was six days ago, "Adam said to David unconcerned for his reputation.

"Your point?" David shot back.

"Well, maybe Cast's god had something to do with our gloomy weather today," Adam said laughing.

"Oh, you hypocritical son-of-a…"

Adam held his finger to his lips, "Uh, uh, this is a family establishment. No swearing."

"Fine. However, while we are talking about the weather, how many people have asked you for your professional opinion about it?"

"About what?"

"The weather. How many people ask you where it comes from?"

"How many? I don't know. Now and then I guess people ask that question," Adam responded, uninterested in the topic.

"And what do you tell them?" David pressed.

"I say it comes mostly from the west."

"Err, you are a real pain in the…."

Adam once again put his finger to his lips with

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one hand and pointed around the room with the other. "What are you asking? Do I tell them that the weather comes from Mother Nature, god, what?"

"Exactly. What do you tell them?" asked David now a little agitated with his friend's lack of commitment to converse with him.

"I tell them the truth. Depending how much I like them, how cute they are, etc, etc, I give them a lesson in the science of meteorology. Why, what should I say?"Adam fired back.

"I don't know. That's why I asked you."

Adam smiled at David, "It's funny, Jordan use to ask me the same question. But I have a suspicion for a much different reason. That man was always looking for an opportunity to plug his god theory into the equation."

"Yeah, but as we agreed earlier, where was his god during the explosion?" asked David.

"Precisely. Well, now you're talking sense. Where indeed, was his god? Why would he, or she for that matter, allow Jordan to be exactly where he was during the explosion? Why wouldn't an all seeing, all knowing god take better care of his followers?"

Every now and then the other patrons glanced over at the two men while they talked. Adam assumed it was because they recognized him from television, but David suspected otherwise. It seemed that any time they brought up the mention of god; people would look over at them; some with approval and others not.

David agreed, "Yes, sir. It is these questions that I continue asking myself while I lay in bed. But still, the toughest part is trying to make sense of all of the little events that led to the death of our friend. One little coincidence followed by another; and another."

"Right. Beginning with the moron that left the batteries plugged in. Then the fact that the power was restored to that part of the building so that we could conduct our research," Adam stated, as he started to pick up steam.

David helped out by adding, "And the power was on just long enough to cause the old batteries to swell and reach their deadly potential."

Adam nods, "Um, hmm. And then…?"

"The jar of nails."

"Right again. Nails. A jar of nails. Take a look around in any given garage, and chances are good that you would find little jars of nuts, bolts, and…"

"*Nails*," David said distantly as he was trying to remember part of a conversation that had something to do with nails, death, and Adam's injury.

"So there we are. A perfect storm is brewing," said Adam in his meteorologist way of speaking.

"Without our knowledge," added David.

"Without our knowledge," agreed Adam. "And, without Jordan's god nowhere in sight."

"Kaboom!" David said a little too loud, and it made the lady at the next booth drop her cup of coffee.

"Yes. Kaboom. And then the three of us trying to hit the ground as fast as we could. I made it; he didn't," Adam remarked.

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"And nothing flew in my direction at all. Nothing."

"Either that or you have some serious cat like reflexes," kidded Adam.

"Well, I do have that. But, I think it was the other, and that not one nail or piece of glass flew in my direction," David said, trying to convince himself of Adam's logic.

Adam sat back in his seat and put his hands behind his head, "It was all one crazy coincidence after another."

David started to get choked up, "Jordan took on the full brunt of the blow."

"And all I could do was lay there shaking, rocking back and forth, holding my neck with warm blood flowing over my hand. I was bleeding from the neck, in pain, and in-shock, while two feet away my childhood friend lay motionless; dead. Dead and gone forever." Adam stared out the window again trying to keep his emotions in check.

"I know; I know," said David as emotions started to build. "I know. I was fine. You were bleeding, only it didn't look life threatening. And, and… Jordan just lay there motionless."

"And then? How long did it take for the paramedics to get there?" Adam said in anger.

"It seemed like forever," replied David.

Adam agreed, "Stupid idiots. They have one job to do, and they couldn't even do it."

"Come on Adam. That's not fair. It really wasn't their fault. We both know that Jordan was dead when they got there," David said trying to calm his friend.

"I know. It's just dumb. The whole thing is just so dumb! Coincidence or not it makes me angry. In fact, I wish there was a god so I could tell him off. I'd have some choice words to say to him." Adam's last remarks earned him several more looks from fellow patrons.

"But there is no god. We both know this because if there were; this wouldn't have happened. At least, not like this," David quipped, trying to avert attention off of his friend.

"True. Very true."

Just then, David remembered how the flying nail story went and where it came from. And so he took the risk and asked Adam if he remembered the dream of the flying nails that Jordan told them years ago, "Hey, do you remember that creepy dream about flying nails that would someday kill Jordan and eventually cause your death?"

Adam just held up his hand and said, "No, and no more crazy talk about dreams." David nodded and did not press further. When they could no longer talk about Jordan's tragic accident, and they had completely exhausted all the possible would of, could of, and what if's, Adam changed the subject and started going down memory lane.

"One of my first memories of Jordan was when I caught him up in an apple tree, in his front yard. I'm not sure why I did it, and, I'm not sure how we became friends afterward, but I couldn't resist the temptation of throwing apples at him. I thought to

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myself, "Gee, it's like shooting fish in a barrel." It was just like my old man used to say about the people that would come in droves to his infamous garage sales, "Just like shooting fish in a barrel, son." When I ran out of ammo, Jordan had just enough time to pick the nearest apple, wound up his arm as best he could while up in the tree, and he let er rip. It plunked me right in the…"

Adam sat there in disbelief as he pointed to where his bandage now stuck to his neck 52 years later. "…neck. Strange."

David burst out laughing, "Adam's Apple. How fitting."

"Yeah. How fitting indeed. Hmm. Anyway. That apple fight turned into a scuffle and later into a lifelong friendship."

"Tell me about some of your trips that your families use to take together," David requested.

His request caused Adam to check his emotions, "Hmm, well, that's funny too, because we were just talking about some of them when I took Ethan to Jordan's home the night before, well you know, and um, we got talking about the time we went to Israel when we were seniors in high school. I can remember a lot about that trip, but one of the things that always stands out the most was how excited Jordan and his family were to see the river he was named after."

David was dumbfounded, "What? He was named after a river? Are you serious or just pulling my leg? I always thought that he was named after Michael Jordan."

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Adam grinned, "Serious? No, he was named after the Jordan River."

"Well who does that? Who names their child after a river?" asked David.

"I'm just glad it was the Jordan River, "said Adam. "I don't believe that I could have been friends with a guy named, Mississippi."

This got a good laugh from the two friends. But then little by little the conversation died down, and when there were no more stories to be told, the two men rose from their seats, paid their tab, and walked out the diner's door.

As the years went by without Jordan being the glue to their friendship, Adam and David saw less and less of each other. Every once in a while they would be in the same store, gas station, or restaurant and would sometimes give a courteous wave to the other, but more times than not, they would go down another isle or look away, hoping not to be seen. This went on for many years until the day that both men had an unexpected encounter in the hospital.

As fate would have it, Adam and David wound up being in the same elevator at the hospital. Being that they were in such tight confinement, the usual courteous wave or acting like something was in their eyes was not an option.

"So what brings you here?" asked Adam.

"My grandson was struck in the chest by a line drive during his little league game last night. It

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hit him so hard that it broke two of his ribs and punctured his lung."

"Ouch. That must have hurt something awful," Adam said with a hint of pity.

David was grateful to run into his old friend and decided to continue the discussion, "Yeah. They said that he passed out and fought for every breath."

"Naturally."

"And you? Why are you here Adam?"asked his old friend.

The two newly reacquainted friends were interrupted when the elevator doors swung open, and two ladies entered the elevator with flowers and a balloon that read, "It's a boy!"

"Congratulations!" said Adam.

The lady with the flowers beamed, "Thank you! It's my first grandchild." She paused for a moment as she tried to think if or how she knew Adam. But before she could say another word the elevator door opened again and the two men shifted from the back of the elevator ready to exit.

"Mr. Weatherman," David motioned for Adam to leave first.

The look on the woman's face was precious as he looked over his shoulder to wave, nod, and smile. Then he added, "Good luck with your new grandchild." The elevator doors closed before she could say anything.

"So, you were saying?" asked David.

Holding his neck, Adam said, "Oh, ah, I'm here

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to see my grandson too. But not for a broken rib or collapsed lung. Ethan's son had his tonsils taken out." Pointing to the bag in his hand, "Thus the customary post surgery ice-cream."

"Grandson?" David pondered. "Ah, yes, I guess that I remember you saying something about a grandchild when I was flipping through the channels one day. I see that you're still at the same station. Good for you."

"Thanks. And you?" Adam had to think for a moment, "How is the pool business treating you?"

"Good. Good, I've expanded to heating and air-conditioning too," David responded eagerly.

"Oh, well, maybe I should give you a call sometime. I've noticed that the old unit at my home is not pushing out the cold air that it used to," replied Adam.

"Sounds like a refrigerant leak. You should give me a call sometime. I'll have one of my guys come out."

"Friends discount?" asked Adam.

"Of course. I knew that, without Jordan, we would probably part ways, but that didn't mean that I stopped thinking about you or considered you my friend, Adam. I often wondered how you were doing from time to time."

"Same here," Adam said, smiling at his friend and continued with, "Hey, let's say we meet up in the hospital cafeteria in about an hour or so. We can get a cup of coffee, a slice of pie, and talk about old times."

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Without hesitation, David replied, "I would like that, my friend."

As planned, the two old friends met downstairs. At first the two awkwardly muddled through trivial conversations, but it didn't take long to rekindle their friendship.

"So, other than business, how's things? How's…" David felt self-conscious that he couldn't remember Adams wife's name.

"Carol," Adam willingly supplied her name. "She passed two years ago from Botulism."

David's face reddened slightly for thinking of a pond of goo, "Oh man, I'm so sorry to hear that. Hey, two years you said? Was that part of the big beef scare that was going on a couple of years back?"

Adam's response was typical for him, controlled and detached, "Yes, she was one of the first to go. In all, four people ended up dying from that."

"What a drag. I'm so sorry to hear that, Adam."

"Yeah. Well, at least we got a pretty good settlement. It paid for her funeral expenses, and I took Ethan and his wife on a trip to Florida."

"Wow. And…"David spoke softer; slower. "… speaking of death, I cannot believe it has been over ten years since Jordan passed."

Adam, wanting to change the subject, "Hey, you'll appreciate this."

David allowed his friend to side step his last comment, "What's that?"

"Well, on our way to Florida, we went past a group of kids from summer camp with a trailer full of canoes." Adam wasn't sure if his old friend would be able to piece that together. His guess was that he wouldn't. He guessed correctly.

"Yeah? And?"

"And that got me thinking about the time the three of us went on that canoe trip." Adam hoped this would get the response he was looking for. It did.

David put his head in his hands and groaned. Adam just laughed. Adam then quickly continued, "Remember when Cast asked you if you wanted to join us? You were like, well, I don't know, I don't care that much for water, not like you guys."

"Yeah, Cast bust a gut on that one," David said blushing.

Adam agreed, and then doing his best Jordan imitation, "*What? What are you talking about, you don't like water? You can't be serious. For crying out loud, you clean pools for a living.*"

David tried to look just as annoyed while Adam told the story, as he had been when they laughed at him years ago.

Adam laughed, and then he continued, "Shoot, it must have taken Cast, 20 minutes to convince you to come along. And then when he finally did, he almost drove off the road when you told us that you will come with; but if you heard any banjos, you were going to get out of the canoe and run across the river." Adam was now laughing too hard to continue.

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Meanwhile, David continued to sit trying to keep an annoyed look on his face and not smile.

Adam got his breath and went on, "At first I had no clue what you were talking about, but then Jordan hummed the chords, "Ba da da dum dum…""

It was getting harder and harder for David to keep back a smile.

Really enjoying himself, Adam continued, "As soon as I heard that, it dawned on me what you were saying, and I chimed in, Ba da da da da da da da dum…"

David could no longer keep a straight face, "Dueling Banjos, my all time least favorite tune. That movie messed me up as a kid, and I didn't want to end up like well; I just didn't want to hear any banjos… or pigs."

At this last comment, Adam laughed hardily, and David joined in.

"Oh, what I would have given to have a recording of that song to play while we were out ten to fifteen miles downriver. Seeing your face would have been something to remember."

David was feeling more at ease in his conversation with his old friend, "I'm telling you, I wouldn't have stuck around long enough for you to see my face."

Adam laughed, then went on with his story, "You know, the other thing that I remembered about that trip, is when we saw that graveyard."

"Hmm," David said, attempting to remember the graveyard.

"Good old Jordan used that crematory to launch into one of his infamous fishing stories."

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"I don't think I recall him telling us a fishing story."

Adam, patient with his slower thinking friend, "Not real fish; you and I fish." Before David could interrupt, Adam went on, "Jordan was always trying to throw out the bait to see if we would bite. He tried hard, very hard to relate everything to his religion." Adam smiled, and paused for a moment so his friend could catch up.

"Remember? He brought up the banjo movie saying that when you said you were going to run across the river, he missed his opportunity to ask you, "*So you want to follow in Jesus' footsteps, huh? Good for you David.*"

"Yeah, I had no idea what he was getting to at first. I thought that it wasn't like Cast to tease me about that movie again—that was always your department," declared David.

"Touché," Adam said smiling then went on with his story, "As soon as you took the bait by asking him what he was getting at, Jordan launched into preacher mode, and there was no stopping him. "*Well, you see David, there is only one man that can walk on water, and that man in Jesus.*" Adam continued, "You, knowing just enough about Bible stories from going to church from time to time as a child, you asked him, but didn't one of his followers walk on water too?"

Adam smiled as he recalled the tactics of his friend, "It's like he was playing you in a game of chess. I was sure that he wanted you to ask that so

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he could continue with his fishing.""*Your right David. His name was Peter.*" Adam doing his best to imitate Jordan, "*You see, Peter wanted to follow Jesus too, so when he saw Jesus walking on the water, Peter asked if he could join him. And Jesus said, come. So Peter got out of the boat and followed after Jesus. Therefore, by you wanting to get out of the canoe to run across the water, you would be a lot like Peter following after Jesus.*""

"Thankfully, you came to my rescue," said David.

"Yeah, I told him that for someone that was so fond of following Jesus, that I didn't see him walking on water. I think that hurt him when I said that, but he did not let on if it did and just said that there was more than one way to follow Jesus."

This brought a lull in their conversation, so the two men just sat in silence drinking their coffee. Over the loud speaker, a children's lullaby played. Adam thought to himself, another life crawling out of the pond. Soon after, a second lullaby played.

David said, "Twins."

"Yup, that's two more lives that found their way out of the goo pond. And that means when Mother Earth gives up two lives; she usually takes two. You know kind of make things all even."

David, uncomfortable with that thought said, "Well, at least they aren't playing any banjos."

After a few more moments of silence the two men finished their cups of coffee, and David spoke up first.

"Time flies by."

"It sure does old friend; it sure does," said Adam reflectively. "Hey, what do you say we get out of here, and you come with me to my home. There is something that I want to show you."

David started to protest, "Oh, I cannot fix your air conditioner today; I don't have my tools with me."

"What? No, it's not that. I want to show you my collection. Remember Cast's collection of propellers? Well, that always inspired me to start my own collection. But I guess that it took his death for me to think what I could possibly care enough about to collect other than stuff that would remind me of work."

David was intrigued, "And?"

"*Nails*," said Adam, "I collect nails."

David flinched slightly, "Are you serious? You collect nails?"

Adam swallowed, "Yeah. I guess that is pretty creepy, huh?"

"No, I understand. It makes sense, but what about Jordan's dream?" Adam grinned, but wouldn't comment on David's question about dreams of flying nails.

Since Adam refused to comment, David continued, "Sure thing. Let's go take a look at that collection of yours. I don't have to be home until five. So I've got some time to kill."

Adam grimaced, "Oh man, did you have to say kill, on our way to see a nail collection?"

Both men got up from their seats without saying another word until they reached the hospital's front door.

"Hey Adam, there is one favor that I would like to ask you to do before we go to your home."

Adam inquired, "What's that, my friend?"

"Can you follow me to Stan's Auto, so I can drop off my car? Then we can drive together from there."

"Sure thing. No problem. So, what's wrong with your car?"

David looked like he just saw a ghost, "Ahh, you're going to laugh at me when you hear. The air conditioning went out."

"What!? You cannot fix your own air conditioning in your car? Wow, I'm certainly glad to find this out before I had you work on the air conditioner in my home," Adam said laughing at his friend's expense.

"Ha, ha. Very funny indeed. Still the wise guy after all these years," David responded shyly.

"Someone has to keep you in line," Adam answered cheerfully.

The two men exited the hospital and drove their cars to Stan's Auto. David got out of the car and went inside. Soon afterward he came back out and walked over to Adam waiting in his car and got in. As they pulled out of Stan's Auto, Adam was anxiously awaiting to ask his old friend if he had ever given any more thought about not believing in an all powerful god.

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He wanted to tell David about his near death experience a few years back to see if he would still count it as coincidence, as Adam had always attributed it to be.

However, before Adam could get the words out, a van, racing around the corner, struck Adam's car with such force that it punctured the fuel line; which caused an explosion and fire swept through the car killing both men instantly. And though the driver of the van and other nearby drivers, passengers, and onlookers raced over to rescue the two men; it was too late. Just like their friend Jordan, Adam and David were experiencing the afterlife. However, unlike Jordan's death experience, their death from the car accident was only the beginning of their troubles.

The fire burned hot and fast. By the time the first responders arrived on the scene, Adam's car had already burned itself out. It was a frightening scene of melted plastic, leather, and crushed steel. Glass and other debris that one time resembled an automobile was scattered all over the road.

A few of the paramedic team that had worked together for many years were brought to tears, and were quite shaken up.

It was reported afterwards that it was the most gruesome crash site the first responders have ever experienced. One of the men, Barney Belltree, was seriously regretting eating the three doughnuts that he ate a half hour before being called to the accident.

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"You all right over there Barney? You're starting to look a little green," came from the voice of the man standing next to a squad car. It belonged to Sgt. Denny. He was a little more than what most people would consider rough around the edges, and many people openly doubted what a heartless man such as Denny was doing in the police force in the first place.

"Funny, you heartless SOB. You know; you can stick that yellow caution tape you got there… well you already know where I think you can stick it," yelled Barney.

"Only looking out for my fellow servicemen," chuckled Sgt. Denny. Then, as he pats his stomach, Denny continued on with his banter by suggesting that Barney was putting on weight, "Looks like you're in training to join the real first responders."

"You know, Denny, you should learn to stick to your job… and…"Barney didn't want to get into it with Denny. It was just what scum like him wanted. Barney thought to himself that Denny wasn't worth his breath.

However, Denny wasn't as eager to stop the banter, "Yup; I get it. All that extra weight makes it harder to catch your breath and harder to talk. Don't you worry about it. We will find a nice desk for you. You can be our number one 'go to' guy. Hey, go to the coffee shop and get some doughnuts."

After saying this, Denny laughed so hard that he coughed up some of the coffee that he was drinking, and a little started to come out of his nose. He just wiped it away and went on amusing himself.

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Barney didn't even look over at him. But he secretly hoped that Denny would choke to death or at least be having a heart attack. He wondered who from his team, if any, would perform CPR on Sgt. Denny.

The rest of Barney's team and the firemen that were in earshot of the entire conversation didn't even notice Denny giving it to Barney. They were too occupied with the reason that they were called. And though the call was apparently no longer considered a rescue mission, saving lives was too embedded into their DNA for any of them to slow down their frantic efforts to get the men out of the burnt vehicle.

Wausau, Wisconsin, is no city, but it is a lot larger than the average Midwest town. Yet, that didn't stop the news about the accident from spreading fast and eventually getting to the doorstep of Janice Montgomery. It was Dan; Jordan's one time fishing buddy and former fellow deacon that broke the news to her.

"Evening, Janice. I'm afraid that I have some bad news," Dan said, trying to look very sincere.

Too sincere to fool Janice as she thought to herself that this couldn't be further from the truth. Dan loved to be the first to tell someone gossip. And the worse the news was, the faster Dan wanted to tell it. But this thought trailed off quickly when Dan continued to tell his news story.

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"I reckon by now you heard about the bad crash on Oak and 8th Ave, near Bridge St. and Hwy. 51."

"Yeah, I heard something about a car accident during a news update while I was watching Jeopardy," Janice said automatically.

"Well, it turns out that you know, well knew, the two men that died in that car accident. They used to be Jordan's friends. You know, the ones that didn't go to church, the ones that I called his project."

Janice put her hand to her mouth in horror. Then speaking with her hand still over her lips, she said their names, "Adam and David. It was Adam and David that died in the accident?"

The news update came rushing back into her head as she replayed it. At first she didn't think much about the fact that they were calling one of the victims of the accident one of their own. When she first heard it, it didn't register they were talking about someone that worked at their television station.

Janice mused aloud, "I guess David was correct. God knew where to find him after all."

Dan didn't know how to respond to her comment, so he ignored it and went on to say, "Yeah, that's their names." Dan confirmed as it just dawned on him what their names were. He was bummed about not being able to recall their names; it would have provided more drama telling his story. But that was all right; they were Jordan's 'project', not his.

Dan kept on, "Well anyway, from what I learned

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at the barbershop,"(Dan's favorite source for gossip) "the two men were spotted at Stan's Auto over there on Oak…"

Janice wondered to herself, "Spotted? Spotted by whom?" But she just let it slide so that Dan could tell his story that he was dying to tell.

"…Apparently they were headed to some gentleman's club on the outskirts of town…"

Again Janice thought about interrupting as she questioned where in the world do people get (make up) such facts.

She imagined that little tidbits like this made the story all the more juicer down at the old man's hangout, also known as Dave' Barbershop. Still, Janice couldn't stop thinking that this last little detail might be from Dan. She wasn't sure why Dan was a deacon at her church. Jordan always had been such a devoted man to everything he was a part of, especially the church. But Dan always seemed to have a secret or something unclean about him that made Janice wonder about his qualifications of being a deacon. The gentleman's club reference was probably a slip-up of his character. His spirit was probably trying to tell on him.

This launched a memory from years past, before Jordan died.

Jordan and Janice were headed out on their date night to one of their favorite Friday night fish fry's just outside of town, when Janice spotted a car in a hardware store parking lot. She only got a quick

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glance of the car, but it sure seemed to look a lot like Dan's red Camaro. The fact that the hardware store was a block away from the gentleman's club didn't cross her mind on the way to dinner.

But on the way back home when they drove past the hardware store parking lot, she got a better look at the car because it was long past closing for the hardware store and it was the only car left in the parking lot.

"Hey Honey," does Dan work at Dick's Hardware?" Janice asked Jordan.

"Hmm? No, why do you ask?"

"No reason."

Janice didn't want to submit her husband to her suspicions, so she didn't share what she was thinking. But now, years later, as she talked to Dan, she wished she would have brought it up to Jordan.

As the memory faded, Janice had the feeling that someone was asking her a question. She looked back at Dan.

Dan asked her again, "When was the last time you heard from them?"

"Other than seeing Adam once in awhile on television, I haven't seen either of them since…" Janice started to trail off as she recalled the last time she saw Jordan's friends. "…Jordan's… since Jordan passed away."

"Hmm. Well, I think this might be a good opportunity to drum up some business for our church." Dan responded and continued with, "You

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know, there will be a lot of people at Adam's funeral. So we should jump on this. I imagine a great deal of our members would be willing to pull together to make some casseroles and stuff. And we can contact his survivors, telling them that he was friends with a member of our church and that we would be *honored* to hold a memorial in our church basement."

Janice was stunned as she thought to herself that Dan was thinking of Jordan's one time close friends deaths as a mere opportunity for, what did he call it? Business? And though she hadn't been in contact with them for many years, they were friends. Good friends.

Yet, the thought of not seeing them since Jordan's funeral made Janice feel ashamed. And later when she found out that Mrs. Frost had already passed away, she felt even more convicted. Jordan would be so disappointed in me if he knew that I dropped the ball on his, *project*. No, not project; friendship.

Dan completely oblivious to her bewildered gaze continued on with his brainstorm. "Oh, I can see it now. We can use the rainbow props for the Noah's Ark play the children put on last fall as decorations for Adam's service. We can have little cards or signs saying something clever like, Adam reported them his entire career, now he is on the other side of the rainbow. Of course, it will have to be a lot more eloquent than that, but you get the point, don't you?"

By this time, Janice was getting quite appalled

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with Dan's insensitivity and made several mental notes: Look for Mrs. Frost's number, and Mrs. McClain's. Call Jane and warn her to dismiss any half baked-nitwitted-lame ideas she might hear about rainbow props, and her last note to herself was one that was way overdue, make an appointment to speak to Pastor Richards about Dan.

For the next six minutes, Janice stood patiently listening to Dan bounce back and forth about the accident and how the church could benefit from their deaths. "One of the guys at the barbershop said that a couple of the paramedics puked their guts out, and one actually fainted when he saw how bad their bodies were burned. Oh, that reminds me, I need to remind the ladies auxiliary not to over bake the cookies. Last time we had a memorial service, some of the cookies were too done and tasted burnt."

This last comment made Janice wince, and she could no longer hold back her discontent, "So tell me again. Where were they heading? A gentleman's club? I didn't know we had any in our neck of the woods. Did you?"

"Oh, yeah, there are two of them in Wausau." After saying this aloud, Dan's face started twitching. He cleared his throat and quickly added, "Some men, I cannot tell you who, because, you know…, I don't want to *gossip*, but some men at our church have had problems in this area. And well, you know, pastor has mentioned it in his sermons from time to time."

"Oh? That's revolting. What decent man in our

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church would subject themselves to immorality and sin by exploiting those women to such perversion? Besides, I always just assumed that Pastor Richards was talking about non-believers, not God-fearing men from our church."

Dan's face reddened as he shifted from foot to foot, then added, "Yeah, it's gross what people get themselves into. I pray for them each and every day. We all should, Janice. It's really sad, and as you said, revolting." Dan swallowed again.

Janice's huge disapproving frown was enough to finally push Dan on his way.

"Well, I'm sorry that you had to hear this news. I'm sure that Jordan would be pretty sad knowing that his project never came to know the Lord."

Janice once again used this opportunity to get in another dagger, "Well, not everyone that calls on the name of Jesus is saved, Dan. The Bible is pretty clear that there are those that will say to him that they called him Lord and even served in the church. But Jesus knows the human heart. He knows if someone is just a whitewashed tomb or if they had a true conversion. The Bible says that we will know them by their fruit. And everyone knows that no good fruit can come from someone that lives a double lifestyle like serving at church and visiting gentlemen's clubs. Don't you agree Dan?"

This last comment hit Dan a little too hard, and he took a step back as if someone gave him an actual punch to his ribs.

Janice felt a little guilty for her last comment. "It

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shouldn't feel this good putting someone in their place, should it?" Janice thought to herself.

"Well, I gotta run, Janice. I'll see you at church."

Janice thought about sending one more dagger, but decided to leave the convictions to God. "Thanks for letting me know, Dan. See you Sunday."

Dan nodded and held up a hand to wave. He attempted to smile, but he was clearly bothered by Janice's comments. On the way home, Dan stopped at the corner quick mart to pick up some beer. He had a strong urge to drown his feelings of dirty secrets.

The following few days were really difficult for Janice. She found out on Tuesday that Adam's wife passed away two years ago from the Botulism cases that went through town. She vaguely remembered hearing something about it on the news, but never would have thought that she would end up knowing one of the people that perished.

And though the discussion with David's wife was sad and stirred up emotions long forgotten, it was good to reach out to a grieving new widow. The emotions that swept across her caused her to cry for many minutes after hanging up the phone with Mrs. McClain.

Janice missed Jordan more than usual during the next three days. She felt that this was somewhat normal, but knew that Adam and David's death would have had quite an effect on Jordan if he were alive.

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Dan's words came back into her head, 'project' she shook her head and corrected the thought as she said them aloud, "Friends."

Adam and David's funerals were on separate days. Recognizing that the two men would have had many of the same friends, Mrs. McClain decided to have David's funeral the day after Adam's. She knew that Adam was a local celebrity and would have more people paying their respects than the average person might have had, David included. And she didn't want her husband's death, or life to be forgotten.

All of the news stations in town covered the story, but only Adam's station did a small blurb about David's pool cleaning business.

David's memorial was at the Catholic church where David went when he was a boy. And despite Dan's interest to drum up business and use tacky sayings on rainbows, Adam's memorial service was held in the basement of their church. Painful or not, Janice made sure that she was on the committee to help organize the gathering.

"I love the little cherubs on the cards on each of the tables," said one lady.

"They are so adorable," said another.

"He was such a handsome man," said a third lady.

All three agreed and shook their heads. Janice just smiled and went over to make sure that the coffee had creamers and straws.

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"Please excuse me; I have to go check the coffee."

However, just a few steps away from the three ladies, Janice was stopped by an elderly couple.

"Janice, there you are. How are you getting along, dear? It was brought to my attention that you knew the weatherman."

"Yes. Adam was his name, "Janice said with a slight correction in her voice.

"Right, Adam. Oh dear, you poor child. The word of his passing must have been awfully hard on you," said the aged woman.

Her husband tried to break away, "I'm going to get a cup of coffee." But he was stopped by his wife as she tightened her grip on his arm.

"No, you had quite enough coffee for the day," she stated. "You know what the doctor said about too much coffee."

He looked like we wanted to crawl out of his skin not knowing how far his wife was going to take this conversation. He was relieved when she continued on about Adam.

Turning back toward Janice, "So tell me dear, how did you know… *Adam*?" She put extra emphases on pronouncing his name to drive home the point to Janice that she remembered.

"He and the other gentlemen that died in the accident were friends with Jordan. Do you remember Jordan?" Janice said playfully.

This made the elderly lady recoil slightly as if she were being accused of being senile and didn't have the faculties to remember events or people ten years

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ago. She thought about a rebuttal to Janice's remark, but decided against it, being that she wanted to learn more about Adam; the weatherman. Her husband just watched and smiled.

"Oh yes dear, of course I remember *Jordan*. Such a lovely man. Kind and very attentive to people. But, tell me more about Adam. What was he like? How did Jordan know him?"

Against her wish, Janice played nice and went along with the elderly woman's request to fill her gossip tank.

"Jordan and Adam grew up across the street from one another and were friends from the very first apple fight."

The elderly couple looked at each other puzzled. Perhaps thinking that young people have a language all their own. They would ask each other later that evening if they ever heard the phrase, 'apple fight'.

Meanwhile, Janice didn't skip a beat and continued her little story, "As the years went on both boys realized that there was something different about the other boy. Jordan realized that neither Adam nor his family ever talked about God, church, or faith. And Adam realized that all Jordan and his family talked about were… well you know; *God*…, *church*…, and *faith*. But, I, well, we at the time when Jordan was still alive, thought that it was because of their vast differences that they not only became friends—they became good friends.

Janice was on a roll now.

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This apparently pleased the elderly woman because Janice could sense that, beneath her smile, she was frantically taking mental notes; notes that she would be able to recall with the slightest of ease during her next get together with the Wednesday morning Retired Woman's Club.

Janice continued, "And like I said; religion was not the key to their friendship. They were in baseball together. Hockey. And, their families took a vacation together from time to time. During this entire time, Jordan would plant a seed here, plant a seed there, watering, planting, and praying for opportunities so that his friend would know the Lord. Sad to say, that day never came. Jordan took over his father's boat restoration business, and Adam went to school to become, well you know, the local weatherman."

Thinking about Adam, Janice corrected herself. "Ah, I mean, meteorologist. And they remained friends up until the accident that took Jordan's life. So, that is how they met and how I know Adam, and why we are holding his memorial service here at our church and well, is there anything else you wanted to know?"

Not wanting to look like a busybody, the elderly woman just smiled and said, "Oh, no dear, you did just fine."

Her husband began to squirm once more, but he knew it would be little use trying to escape. "Oh, my, how exciting it must have been, knowing a real life celebrity." Janice flinched at this, but the elderly woman either didn't seem to notice or care. Her

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husband, on the other hand, coughed a few fake coughs as he attempted to disguise his laughter. His wife didn't seem to notice that either, but Janice was sure that he would be paying for that very soon.

Janice, tired of playing nice, looked for an escape. That's when she saw a lady in her mid to late thirties in the far corner of the room, had dropped her coffee and was looking for something to wipe it up from the floor. Janice thanked the couple for their interest in hearing a story about her husband's friendship with today's honored guest, Adam the celebrity.

After excusing herself, she grabbed some napkins and went over to help clean the spill.

"Oh, look at me. I'm so clumsy sometimes. One would think that being a waitress, I would know how to handle a cup of coffee and not be so clumsy. "

Janice looked up at the lady understandingly.

The lady thanked Janice for her assistance and stuck out her hand, saying, "Hello, I'm Noel."

The two women smiled and shook hands. "My husband and I own a small diner where Adam would meet his two friends."

Janice asked, "Noel's Diner? The one on 5th Street? The one that has the sign in the window that says, "Come on in and rest your feet at Noel's, where it is Christmas every day?""

Not recognizing Janice as a customer, Noel blushed and thought, "Now how could she possibly know that?" She thought about asking Janice but just

said, "Yes, that's the one." Then continued with her story how she knew Adam. "The one died about, oh, I don't know, I think it's been almost ten years now. If I remember correctly, his name was Jordan something."

Janice felt the knot in her stomach as it moved slowly up her throat.

Noel continued, "Well, anyway, he was always so kind and polite. I just knew he was a Christian. He was always sharing his faith with his friends. But they would not listen to him. And they could be so mean to their Christian friend, Jordan. They always gave him such a hard time and would poke fun at him for being nice. But, being that they were my customers for such a long time, I felt it was my responsibility to pay my regards. But I just feel so bad for this Jordan guy. He tried so hard to witness to them. He even tried to talk to my husband, but after hearing him talk to Adam and the other one, Kyle would not have anything to do with him."

Janice, holding back tears, grabbed Noel and gave her a tight hug.

She embraced Noel so long that Noel started to feel self-conscious, and thought everyone must be staring at them.

But just then, perhaps sensing the same thing, Janice released her and retook her hand, and said, "Thank you Noel."

Noel, looking a little more than puzzled about the whole thing changed the subject by talking about the coffee spill, "An inch to the left and my coffee

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cup would have landed right in that poor woman's purse," said Noel, nodding at the lady sitting at the end of a row of tables.

Knowing that she could no longer hold back her tears, Janice spotted an older couple looking for something at the dessert table and excused herself. "Yes, almost but not quite. No harm is done, Noel. It was nice talking to you, but I am needed by the desserts."

Noel nodded and smiled, "You too."

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Adam and David's Hearing

ONCE AGAIN, THE TWO FRIENDS were together, but it wasn't Adam's burning car that they were in; the last place on earth that the two men were together. To them, this place was a much scarier place to be, than a burning car.

They were in a room, a large room. The room was enormous and didn't appear to have a ceiling. All four walls had pillars of marble that were nothing Adam and David had ever seen during their lifetime. One pillar alone would have been awe inspiring enough for human eyes, but this room had a seemingly endless number of these magnificent pillars.

And that was just the pillars. The wood, too, was nothing that the two men could have ever thought to exist. It glittered as if it were infused with diamonds, pearls, and many other varieties of rare and beautiful gems.

Everything in and about the room was breathtaking, especially a huge double door with

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a sign above it that said, "Hall of Justice." Nothing seemed ordinary or out of place in the room; nothing, that is, except for the two men. And as they stood there taking in all of the room's beauty, they were correct to think that this place, whatever it was or wherever it is, was not a good place for them to be.

Music and singing could be heard from every direction outside the walls of the room, but it certainly wasn't from any cheap elevator speakers or the best surround system that human ears have ever heard.

Adam thought to himself, "This music, the singing, it sounds…*angelic*." He swallowed hard.

Adam was the first to speak, "I have a feeling we are not in Kansas anymore."

"I agree. And I'm very frightened, Adam; more frightened than I have ever been in my life," David said, his voice shaking slightly.

"Well, that's another thing; I don't think we are alive anymore," Adam corrected.

David nodded his head in agreement. But the two men were wrong; dead wrong. For the first time and the rest of eternity, they will soon discover that they couldn't be more alive. In fact, their life in eternity had just started.

"What do you suppose this is all about? All the marble, wood, music, and statues."

David looked around the room again. "What statues?"

At first Adam thought what he was seeing

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was statues throughout the room, but as his eyes adapted to the magnificence of illumination that was evidently not coming from whatever light source that he was knowledgeable of, he blinked his eyes several times and realized that what he thought were statues were moving about; flying.

Adam thought to himself, "How do statues fly?" But down deep he already knew the answer. Not willing to say what they were, Adam asked his friend what he was thinking, "How can statues fly, David?"

"They are not statues, Adam. They are some sort of angel or something; I believe they are called cherubs. I remember seeing them in my children's Bible that I had when I was a kid."

It took a moment for Adam's brain to adjust to his new surroundings. He spent his entire life convincing himself that things such as Heaven, angels, and God didn't exist, and now his mind had to take it all in and translate what he was seeing as real.

Adam thought aloud, "This place does exist? It is… was, all true? How can this be possible? It's not even logical. God doesn't exist."

Slam!

The force that came from behind Adam struck him so hard that he attempted to take a step forward, but the chains around his ankles prevented this from happening. He would have fallen down if it weren't

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for the firm hand on his shoulder yanking him back upright.

For the first time, Adam and David saw that they had chains around their ankles. They looked at each other puzzled, and even more frightened than before. Then slowly both men turned to see what or who had slammed into Adam and made him lose his balance. When they saw the two figures behind them, they were wishing that they had not looked.

The two figures standing right behind the two men were not men themselves. No human being could be that tall, brawny, and majestic looking. They were beautiful looking and yet very powerful too. They stood more than two feet taller than Adam and almost three than David. And like everything else in the room, what they were wearing was nothing the two men had ever seen. It appeared that they were wearing armor. Only, the armor they were wearing was different from what Adam and David were used to seeing in war pictures or on the nightly news. Their armor was white and shiny, and because of the pure, glowing, illumination of their appearance, it was impossible for them to take it all in, let alone comprehend.

Their swords that hung by their sides glistened so brightly that it hurt Adam and David's eyes. Their shields were magnificent as well. The guard behind Adam had images of a lion and lamb wearing armor on his shield. The other guard's shield had a cross made of rubies. Both guards had on helmets that

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had writings on them that the two men could not interpret.

Intimidated by their absolute size and brilliance, Adam and David thought it would be better to face forward. As they continued to look around, it dawned on Adam what the place reminded him of, despite the fact it was nothing like his eyes had ever seen. And, just as the thought occurred to him where they were, the door to the left opened. Above the door was a sign that said, "Judges Chambers."

At that instant, all of the cherubs slowed down their flying about and hovered in position.

The two guards straightened to stand even more at attention than that they already were standing. Through the doorway, came two figures.

The two men did not recognize the first, but the second figure they knew instantly. And at first the sight of seeing him brought a smile of hope to Adams face, but then he soon realized that if he were here and if this place did exist, it might not go as well for Adam and David as one could hope.

And so, his smile vanished—along with his hope.

"Jordan!" shouted David.

Slam!

This time it was David that was hit by the guard standing behind him. The slam was followed by a hard and sturdy hand on his shoulder and for the first time they heard someone else's voice other than their own in this strange new place.

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"Silence," said, David's guard.

The two men looked at each other and then back to watching their friend and the first figure climb many stairs up a massive wooden structure. Jordan made it to his seat first while the second figure kept going up.

When he finally stopped and was ready to sit down, it looked to Adam and David where the *man* (for lack of a better word) was about to sit to be twenty to thirty feet above them. And though he was no bigger than Adam or Jordan, and had similar features, there was something about him that frightened Adam and David so much that you could hear their chains rattling.

However, Adam had the thought that it wasn't this man that they should fear; something told him it was the other one that sat down just below the first, the one that they used to call their friend. Instinctively, Adam knew that Jordan was not there to warmly greet his old friends.

As the first man sat down, a loud voice announced that Judge Moses was now ready to proceed over the sentencing hearing.

David always a step slow in the thinking department whispered to Adam, "Oh, we are in a courtroom."

Adam, afraid of another blow from the guard behind him, said nothing.

It turned out to be a wise decision on Adam's part, but David was not as fortunate.

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Slam!

Adam and David didn't see how it happened, but either the seats throughout the courtroom were filled very quickly by the individuals filing in at quite the rapid pace or they 'just appeared.' Adam thought it was the latter. He believed that he was going to figure out this place and the situation that he and David were in, and that nothing would surprise him. But, he soon found out that he was wrong to think that way.

Judge Moses started the proceedings in a typical courtroom-like setting. First he looked at Jordan, and as he did, he smiled. Then, he looked straight ahead to address the court, "Welcome to the court for the departed. By this, I do not mean those that have departed from their time on earth. For if you are standing in my courtroom, that I have been given the honorable duties to perform as the judge over these proceedings, you have already departed from your existence on earth. Thus, in my courtroom, the word departed you will soon find out has an entirely different meaning than that which you have known on earth. "Moses paused for a moment for this to have its effect on the accused. However, in this particular case, only one of the men understood its meaning and was visibly alarmed. The other man remained unfazed, and stood smiling at his witness. Moses continued, "For if you are standing in my courtroom, you, the accused, have already been

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judged and found guilty of unbelief by the one true judge, King Jesus."

At this point, all of the cherubs started chanting, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus…"

"The process is always the same gentlemen. First, Jesus sits on his throne as he judges each person. If they are one of his sheep and they belong to him, the entire kingdom throws a grand celebration as they welcome Heavens newest citizen. But, if Jesus finds them guilty of unbelief and an unrepentant heart, as he did with you two, he gives the case over to me or another judge for their hearing and sentencing. But I have to tell you, if you have found your way into my courtroom by your decision of unbelief, you will soon see that this, your sentencing hearing, is a mere formality."

Moses paused again, and turned his head slightly to drive home his point to Adam. Looking directly now into Adam's eyes, Moses continued, "You have already chosen your eternal destiny. Therefore, if you believe in fate or not, you are here in one of Heaven's courtrooms to receive the wages for your choice not to believe. And, it was your unjustified thinking that led you here. Thus, because of your unbelief, your eternal sentence, as determined by the King, ["King Jesus, Jesus, Jesus"…] will be carried out at the conclusion of this hearing. And then comes justice."

At this point in the hearing, Moses picked up a file that was sitting on his desk; he took something

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out and read it. Then he continued, "For the sake of the accused, from this point forward the witness for this court hearing shall be called by his earthly name as well as the accused will be called by their earthly names." Moses turned back to Jordan and asked, "Is this agreeable to you?" Then, Judge Moses spoke in a language that was unknown to Adam and David but they could see that by the nodding of Jordan's head that he had agreed with the judge.

The two friends noted that the judge did not bother to ask for their permission.

"Very well," said Moses. "Let us begin."

Moses pointed to three massive filing cabinets that were made out of the same beautiful wood that was everywhere else in the courtroom, and said, "As customary, all of the charges against the accused, Mr. Adam Frost and Mr. David McClain, will be tossed out, and will not be used as evidence against them during these proceedings. But, as the judge presiding over this hearing, I do want to point out the fact that any one of these charges would be enough evidence against the accused that stand before us today, first and foremost being the law that was written on their hearts while they were in their mother's womb. But as customary, the court will show mercy on the accused and will use the evidence of only one human witness. Because of the fact that, both of the accused had been appointed the same trial date, being both men knew the witness, the court has chosen only to look at the evidence of the witness, Jordan Montgomery."

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At the mention of Jordan's name, all those who were in attendance cheered and applauded; which caused Adam and David to share a worried look. As promised, the filing cabinets disappeared. And as promised, the only evidence left against the two friends was a single file in Judge Moses' hand.

Moses set the file on his desk, opened it, and took out the first piece of evidence. After reading it to himself, he read it aloud, "Dear Lord Jesus, I love you and thank you for the life you have given me. All that I have is from you and all that you desire in return for what you have given me is my worship to you. So I stand here today to honor and worship you, King Jesus." ["King Jesus, Jesus, Jesus…"]

Judge Moses continued reading Jordan's prayer, "And Father, just as you have given your Son ["Jesus, Jesus, Jesus…"] your chosen people to belong to him, to live in his kingdom forever, ["Forever and ever and ever without end. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus…"] I ask that you would give me the privilege to win over the hearts of my two friends, Adam and David."

At this point, the cherubs stopped chanting long enough to show their appreciation to Jordan, ["Well done Prince Jordan, well done, what an amazing prince he is, well done Prince, well done…" then back to their chant, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus…"]

Judge Moses looked at Jordan and asked him, "Does this sound familiar?"

For the first time, Adam and David heard their

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friend speak. Although, as he spoke, his voice was unfamiliar to them, "Yes, your honor, it was one of countless prayers that I had prayed for the accused."

Hearing the word *accused* stung both men. "Ouch," Adam thought, "That hurts coming from our friend. Accused? I think *friend* would have been a better word to describe what we had on earth. Accused? I understand the judge saying this, but Jordan, how could you turn on us. We are your friends."

Judge Moses nodded and then wrote something down. He continued, "Next the court will show a portion of the accused earthly life with their witness.

At this point of the hearings, a hologram, the clearest, most lifelike, and breathtaking hologram that Adam and David have ever seen in the best sci-fi movies that they have watched during their time on earth started to play a scene; a scene from their life.

"Morning, Adam."

"Hello, Cast."

"What a great morning the Lord has given us today."

Adam shrugged his shoulders and said, "If you were listening yesterday, I reported that we were going to have a splendid day today. No surprises here."

Jordan just smiled.

For the first time, Adam and David were able to see the thoughts that were going on in their friend's mind as he talked with them.

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"Lord, please let my friend Adam see your beauty. Let him know how much you love him, just as you love me."

The two men looked up as David walked into the diner.

"Morning Jordan. Morning other man with Jordan."

At this, Jordan prayed, "Lord, and I also lift up my friend David, a man that you have entrusted to me to be my friend and to pray for."

"Hello, Sir David."

Adam asked, "Did someone say something?" Then he exaggerated his look by looking to the ground. "David, is that you?"

"Funny weather dude."

Adam then turned his attention to Jordan. "So, now that you have us here, what is this all about? Other than getting a free breakfast, why did you want to meet with us? I got the feeling that you wanted to share something important."

Jordan said a quick prayer and looked at his friends, "Last night I had a dream."

David laughed as he said, "If this is one of those dreams that you confess your love for me, then just keep it to yourself."

"Ditto," stated Adam.

Jordan pressed on, "I dreamt about our canoe trip that we took years ago." This got comments about banjos and pigs coming from his friends, but Jordan talked over them, and they finally stopped and allowed their friend to continue telling about his

dream. It was clear at this point to both Adam and David that their friend was being quite serious and had wanted to share something important, or at least something that Jordan felt was important.

"In my dream, there was a bear that was in our camp and as we pulled up to the shore, Adam jumped out and started trotting in the bear's direction. David and I tried to protest."

"No, I wouldn't," interrupted David.

Speaking directly to Adam now, "You called back over your shoulder saying that we didn't need to worry because you could speak bear. As you approached the bear, he stood on his hind legs. He easily outsized you by a couple of feet. I remember dreaming that I was sad that you were going to get mauled to death, and you would die without knowing the Lord."

David and Adam just sat there unmoved.

"But to our surprise, the bear started talking to you in a language that David and I couldn't understand. The two of you talked for about half an hour and then the bear went back to all fours, gave out a loud growl that all of us understood, and walked back into the woods from which he came."

"So I can talk bear now? Interesting. I should put that on my resume." Adam knew what Jordan wanted to hear, so he asked, "So what did we talk about?"

"I'm glad you asked," said Jordan.

"I'm sure you are," Adam said with a smile.

"Well, for the longest time you just sat on one of

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the logs that we sat on by the fire the night before; crying."

"Oh?" said Adam.

"When you stopped, you told us that the bear said that I was going to die soon by flying nails, and you were going to be wounded but not killed, at least not just yet. But, and interestingly enough, you said that the nails would eventually lead you to your death."

"Flying nails huh? Okay, so let me get this straight. Nails with little wings were going to kill you and wound me. But eventually they would be the cause of my demise. What? Did I die of tetanus poisoning? Note to self, always carry a hammer and get a tetanus shot."

David chuckled, but not at Adams remarks; he was still thinking about little flying nails. He imagined they would be similar to the little flying toasters that he had as a screen saver on his computer years ago.

Jordan, not finished retelling the dream continued on, "The bear also told you that you should listen to me that what I had to tell you had long lasting consequences." (in the dream, the bear actually used the word eternal and not long lasting. But Jordan thought he would stick to a less preachy word) "That your life depended on it."

"Why me? Why just me and not David?" asked Adam.

"Yeah, why not me?" David said indignantly.

"The bear told you it was because David had

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already heard and rejected the truth enough, but there was still time for you."

David recoiled at this last comment. Jordan looked sympathetically at David but didn't offer an apology.

Not wanting to miss the opportunity, Jordan addressed both men. "I don't know what you two think of dreams, if you're anything like me, you probably don't take much stock in the meanings of dreams, but this dream kept me awake for the rest of the night."("Praying." Jordan thought to himself, but didn't confess to his friends.)

At this point, the hologram switched over from the scene in the diner to Jordan's living room.

Jordan on his knees, "Lord, why did you show me this dream? You know that I always pray for my friends Adam and David. I love them and want them to have eternal life in your kingdom just like I will someday. And you know that I have already said all that I can to convince them that they are sinners and need your forgiveness. But they continue to mock me and will not hear. If this dream is true, please tell me what I am to say to them so that they can understand. I don't know what more I can do, Lord. My heart aches for their souls. Please don't let it be too late for them; for David."

For the next few minutes, the hologram continued to show Jordan praying for his friends as tears

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streamed down his face. As it did, Adam and David looked at each other uncomfortably.

The hologram shifted back to the diner, "Gentleman," said Jordan, "I believe two things about this dream. First, I don't think it is too late for either of you to know the truth." Jordan felt that he was lying about David's destiny as he felt his face flush, "And the second is, I believe that this dream is a warning to both of you; a final warning."

Adam spoke first, "I'm certain you do friend. That is why I want you to know, and believe me when I tell you this, Jordan; I release you of any blame. I will never tell anyone or anything for that matter (Adam was referring to Jordan's make believe god) that you did not do your best to convince me that what you believe is true."

David agreed, "What he said."

Jordan was heartbroken how quickly his friends were to dismiss his pleas, but did not push any further.

The hologram ended.

Adam's only thought, "I think that I'm about to regret saying that to Jordan." But not wanting another blow, he just stood there thinking it would probably be better for him to wait until he was called on to speak.

This turned out to be a wise decision because Moses was about to speak again.

Moses took another piece of evidence from the

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single folder on his desk, read it, then after reading it aloud, he set it on the desk, and watched with the rest of the courtroom, the holograms new evidence.

The new scene was the warehouse where Jordan died. It showed the three men in the room, talking. But also, in the same room, was another figure that looked similar to the guards that stood behind Adam and David. Just as the explosion was about to go off, the guard looking figure held out his shield in David's direction and put his sword in front of Adams neck. In the hologram, they could see in slow motion a nail was heading straight for Adams carotid artery. If the nail continued on its trajectory, Adam would have died along with Jordan. However, with the sword in its path, it veered off just enough to strike Adam one inch to the left, causing no more than a flesh wound.

The hologram stopped.

Moses spoke up again, "See there, Adam, there is such a thing as fate. You were not meant to die. Ananchel, the Angle of Grace, and Jordan's protector put his shield over David and held out his sword to deflect the nail from killing you."

Adam and David thought, '*protector*?' Jordan died.

Sensing what the two men were thinking, Moses pressed on, "The evidence clearly showed that though you were enemies of the Almighty High God ["Yahweh" the cherubs whispered in reverence.] He

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spared your lives so that you would have ample time to repent of your sins and receive eternal life from the power of His Son's blood and sacrifice. ["Jesus, Jesus, Jesus…"] And yes, even though Ananchel had to let Jordan die, he did it out of obedience to his Master in order to save your lives."

Adam and David did not speak, but the sound of chains rattling began to grow louder.

"The next piece of evidence from Jordan's witness is…"

The hologram continued to play, scene after scene, from moments of the lives the three men shared while living on earth. After each scene played, Moses conferred with Jordan, wrote something down, and announced the next piece of evidence against Adam and David. And as each of the scenes ended the two men continued to fear more and more that this was not going to end well for them.

The sound of their chains rattling, grew louder and louder.

At long last, after what appeared to be a really long time, a lifetime, in fact, their lifetime with Jordan, the holograms came no more.

At this time, Moses said something to Jordan that the two men could not understand and finished with, "Well done Prince Jordan." The cherubs apparently agreed and joined in a chorus of ["Well done Prince Jordan" and chants of "Truth, truth, truth…"] this

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changed back to chants of ["Jesus' Jesus, Jesus" and "Forever live the King…"]

Next, Moses turned his attention to Adam and David. "The evidence presented in Jordan's witness against you, Adam Frost and David McClain, satisfies the court as sufficient evidence for sentencing. As one can see, Jordan had tried many times to share the truth with the accused. It had also been successfully proven during this hearing that both of the accused had overwhelmingly dismissed and rejected the truth and had belittled the witness who was once their friend. Therefore, in accordance to the law of King Jesus ["Jesus, Jesus…"] the court will now commence with sentencing."

Both men thought it, but only David said the word aloud, "Sentencing?"

Slam!

Followed by a firm warning, "Keep silent unless you have been addressed directly by Judge Moses to speak."

Moses, smiling at the guard that gave David the *gentle* warning said, "All right, if the accused would like to address the court at this time, they may address the court. But one at a time," he quickly added.

David was hesitant to speak because his shoulder still throbbed from the guard's gentle reminders. So

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Adam spoke first, "Jordan, how can you, our friend, allow something like this to go on? Do something. This is wrong what they are doing to us. You are our friend. They call you a prince. And as a prince, surely you must have some clout. So, on the behalf of your *friends*, let them know how close we are and that this is all a mistake."

Jordan was about to speak, but Moses said something to him in his new language.

Jordan smiled and nodded.

Leaning forward, from way atop from his desk, Moses held up both hands and said to Adam and David, "Let me make this perfectly clear. The term 'friend' has no more meaning between you, the accused and Prince Jordan. You see, while the three of you lived on earth together, God ["Yahweh, Yahweh…"] in his wisdom, for His divine purpose, allowed you to be friends with the future Prince Jordan."

"But…"

Slam!

Moses not willing to be interrupted continued his explanation, "But that was then. Now, now that he is in his glorified state, he is no longer your friend; he is now your enemy." And as the many times that Moses had to say this to the accused that stood in the courtroom before Adam and David, Moses pressed on with patience and grace, "Jordan, while living on earth, was an enemy of God until

the day of his rebirth. Up until that day, Jordan's fate would have been the exact same as you two men. But, by God's wisdom, his grace, his mercy, and his love for Jordan, all of that changed when Jordan's father led him through the scriptures to show his son what Jordan tried to show you two. But unlike you two, Jordan embraced the truth. And so as he and his father talked, and read the Bible together, and as Jordan asked questions, his father, by God's wisdom and divine grace, led Prince Jordan to the saving realization that all men must come to know, and believe: They are a sinner, and as a sinner they are the enemy of God. Only through the death and resurrection ["The Lamb that was slain. Jesus, Jesus…"] of the King of Kings and their glorious Creator, they can confess their sin, repent, and give their life to their Redeemer, the Majestic Ruler of the universe, their Savior. And if or when this happens, they are no longer enemies of God, they are his beloved sons and daughters; his children."

Adam, sensing that Moses was finished, and knowing that his, or their time was running out, risked another blow. "But he loved us. I heard it with my own two ears. Jordan loved us and if we *were* his friends, even if we were enemies with God, why are we no longer his friends?"

Moses was now starting to lose his patience, "Because he is no longer living on earth as a man, he is in his glorified state. He is now a prince. Period. End of story."

"Friends then; friends now. It shouldn't change

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just because he is now a prince. If he was an enemy of God as we were, are, then surely God would extend his mercy to allow Jordan to continue his friendship with us; in his *glorified* body or not."

On cue, SLAM!

Then, the physical warning from the guard not to speak, was accompanied by a stern verbal warning, "Silence!"

Moses, now clearly upset shuts down this logic and makes his point very clear about the differences of life on earth versus life eternal. And as he spoke for the next 20 minutes, Adam nor David dared to say another word.

When Moses was finished, he inquired, "Am I clear? Do you finally understand the difference?"

At this point, seeing that Jordan could no longer be of any help to his friends…, enemies…, out of desperation Adam no longer tried to convince Judge Moses of their innocence and turned his focus on attacking Jordan, "Your honor, the evidence against me, *us*, are examples of Prince Jordan's, failure to successfully communicate the severity of our fate. If we knew that listening to, trusting in and believing the words of our, (Adam carefully chose his words) one time earthly friend, we would have most certainly listened to Jordan, and we too would have wholeheartedly received the truth. So, your honor, this trial should not be about how David and I failed to embrace the truth. Instead, it should be about

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how Jordan, Prince Jordan, failed in his mission to convince us of the truth."

"Right! I agree," said David, bracing for another blow.

None came.

Adam continued, "Because your honor, the court made it abundantly clear that Prince Jordan knew and believed the truth. Therefore, your honor, he is the one who failed and should be on trial today, not us."

At this, both men braced themselves, but the guards remained still.

"Very well, to humor you, I'll check King Jesus' *Book of Law* ["Jesus, Jesus…"] to see how to proceed with your claim."

Adam and David felt a glimmer of hope, but it was short lived.

"Ah, here it is, "Moses read aloud from a book on his desk, "If the accused should try to convince the court that the reason that they are appearing in front of the court is not of their doing, and claim it is the fault of the witness… sternly reaffirm to them the reason they are on trial."

Smiling, Moses continued, "What this is saying fellows, is, you have heard the evidence against you. It is against you, Adam and you David, and it is not against Prince Jordan."

"But…"

Slam!

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Moses stood, pointed at Adam and David and said in a voice that could rival the sound of thunder, "SILENCE! THERE WILL BE NO MORE TALKING FROM THE ACCUSED. YOU HAVE EXHAUSTED THE PATIENCE OF THIS COURT." Then, in a very hushed voice, but still quite audible to everyone in the courtroom. "*Do I make myself absolutely clear?"*

After clearing his throat, Moses continued with, "Jordan did not fail. His mission in life was not to convert you two nor anyone one else for that matter. His mission was to be a faithful servant. And that, I can assure you, he was. He was, is, and will always be a faithful servant to our Lord, and his kingdom."

Adam and David stood silent, except for their rattling chains, the two men were no longer even capable of talking. The fear that ran through them made it impossible for them to speak, at least for the moment.

When Judge Moses finished speaking, he sat back down, closed the book of law, set it on his desk, and picked up another book from his desk. He then prepared to read from the last piece of evidence against the accused; the evidence that was written before the foundation of the earth, *The Book of Life*, the book that Moses now held in his hand.

There were only two sounds that could be heard in the courtroom, the sound of the cherubs singing the praises of Jesus and the sound of chains; rattling.

Moses addressed Adam and David, "Because our Glorious King is the king of mercy; I will now read

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from the *Book of Life* and if either or both of your names are written in the book, this hearing will be thrown out and we will welcome you here to live for eternity as brothers and fellow princes."

After a few moments Moses, satisfied of his findings, or what he didn't find, shut the book and replaced it back on his desk.

He spoke the words, "It is my duty to proclaim that the names, Adam Frost nor David McClain are written in the book." Moses stood again, and this time everyone in the courtroom stood with him. Then Moses addressed Adam and David for the last time. With a smile on his face, he said to the two men, "We have now come to my favorite part of the hearing. Adam and David, you have been standing for quite some time now, and thus, it would please the court if you would now, kneel."

As they have done countless times before, the guards pressed firmly on the two men's shoulders, forcing them to kneel. "It is now time for you to fulfill scripture by telling the court what you have learned."

At first, Adam and David didn't know what they were supposed to say, but simultaneously both men heard the words of their witness as he had told them on more than one occasion, Philippians 2:10-12.

On their knees, in a courtroom in Heaven, Adam and David spoke their final words, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

Moses agreed, "Indeed. You have spoken the

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truth; King Jesus Christ is Lord." The cherubs apparently agreed too, ["King Jesus is Lord, King Jesus is Lord,…"]

Satisfied that justice had been served; Moses wrote something down in the file on top his desk and said, "This hearing is now over." He then looked to the guards and gave them their orders, "Guards, let the sentencing begin. You know what to do."

With this said, Moses climbed down from his bench, embraced Jordan in a hardy hug, followed by a kiss on both cheeks, and a pat on his back. The two climbed the rest of the way down to the floor, opened the door and exited the courtroom.

Jordan never turned back to see Adam and David for a last time nor did he ever think about them again.

Once the door shut, the guards took Adam and David to the Hall of Justice, and to the last door in Heaven that they would have the privilege to walk through.

The guards opened the door, pushed the two men into the dark and shut the door. Adam and David were neither seen nor heard from again, at least not in Heaven.

As Adam and David's eyes adjusted from the brilliance of the light in Heaven's courtroom to the darkness of the new place where they now stood, they realized that once again they were in a courtroom.

However, unlike the last courtroom, this

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courtroom was not anything like it. There were no majestic pillars and shinning wood. No music or singing. None of that was there.

Although, there were nonetheless a few similarities. Like the courtroom in Heaven, there were many sounds to be heard. But they weren't sounds that either of the men liked, nor desired to hear. And these sounds were louder; much louder. These new sounds that they were hearing were loud enough to drown out the sound of their rattling chains.

The first of the new sounds that they heard, made the men more frightened than they have ever been; even more frightened than they were moments before as they stood before Judge Moses. It was the sound of screaming and crying.

And the other similarity of the last courtroom was the sound that came from the flying statues. And though the two men didn't care for the chanting of Jesus' name that came from the cherubs in Heavens courtroom, what these statues were saying was far worse:

"Fresh meat, fresh meat, fresh meat…"

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Noel's Witness

"I CANNOT BELIEVE HOW CLUMSY I am," Noel thought to herself again. "An inch more to the left and boom, there goes my coffee into that poor woman's purse. Yikes."

She smiled as she thought to herself, "That Janice lady seemed nice. It was a little odd for her to guess or *know*, the name of the diner, not to mention the slightly embarrassing and uncomfortable hug—but all that aside, she seemed nice."

Noel mused aloud in a whispered voice, "Almost, but not quite." Her smile faded as she thought; "Adam and his friend use to say that same thing. Strange."

Not really wanting to be at the wake in the first place, and feeling guilty for leaving her husband shorthanded at the diner, Noel started packing up her stuff and headed for the stairs to leave. On her way out, she spotted Janice by the dessert table, but she was unable to make eye contact with her.

As Noel drove to the diner, she thought about the car accident that took the lives of the weatherman and his friend. She was saddened by the thought that neither Adam nor his friend displayed any signs of knowing the Lord. As she thought about them, she came to the conclusion that the friend of theirs that died about ten years ago, the one they were fond of making fun of, must have been the glue to their friendship because following his death, she saw less and less of either of them, and never both together. The thought of the accident also made her concerned for her teenage son. She couldn't bear the thought of losing him to a car accident. It saddened her to think that if he died, he too would be like Adam and his friend, and would die not knowing the Lord. A Bible verse came crashing into her mind. It struck her so clearly that she found herself saying it aloud, "The wages of sin is death." Then she repeated the word again, "Death." So, she prayed for his safety and more important; his salvation.

Pulling into her parking space behind the diner, Noel grabbed her purse, got out of her car, locked the door and left to go inside. Wanting to ease into the transition to 'work-mode', Noel went up the alley to the front of the diner instead of entering from the back door as was customary. This way she could assess how busy the diner was, allowing her time to prepare in case they were super busy.

As Noel approached the diner's entrance, she glanced at the sign in the window that Janice asked

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her about, and she smiled. Then, seeing that they were indeed, super busy, her smile turned into what her husband referred to as her, 'work-face'.

As she opened the door and walked into the diner, Noel was greeted with, "It's about time. If you're done playing church girl, I need you to put on your work-face," came a voice from the kitchen. "We are as busy as a one-legged man in a butt kicking contest around here. Beatrice went home sick, and your lazy son didn't show; again." The voice belonged to Noel's husband, Kyle.

Noel shook her head to clear out what she had been thinking. Then she said to Kyle, "Why is he always my son when you're mad at him and your son when the two of you are hiding downstairs in the man cave playing video games?"

Noel, in a deep voice, mocked her husband, "Nice play son. That's my boy. Ha, ha, ha."

"You finished?" barked Kyle. "If so, then put on your work-face, like I told you and grab an apron. The couple at booth three is starting to look like they are going to book out of here if they don't get their order taken soon."

"Okay, dear, I'm on it." Then she pointed to her face and said, "And for your information, I already have my work-face on; see?"

Kyle nodded at her and winked.

Noel sighed, "No rest for the weary."

"Weary? Why are you tired? I'm the one busting my butt over here."

Noel raised her eyebrow, "Yes, dear." Then

added, "What was wrong with Beatrice? Why did she go home?"

"What's not wrong with that lady?"

Noel walked over to Kyle, kissed him on the cheek, and grabbed an apron. As she was putting it on, he slapped her butt. For that, she gave him a look that was a cross between a stern warning not to do that in public and playful, but leaning more to the stern warning side.

Kyle smiled and said, "I know; I know. Not in front of the customers," as he winked at her again. Then he asked her, "So, how was the weatherman's funeral?"

"It was a wake. The funeral is not until tomorrow."

Kyle rolled his eyes and used one of his favorite expressions that he picked up from his son, "*Whatevs*. You knew what I meant."

"It was nice." Thinking of Janice, "I met a lot of nice people there. You should have come."

"What? Close up shop for a funeral? Are you out of your mind? I wouldn't even do that for a family member."

Noel's parents, Banks and Crystal, were devoted Lutherans. They sent Noel and her younger brother Fraser, to their churches small private school.

Growing up, many people asked Fraser if he was named after the tree or the quirky old man that was on television years ago. His typical response was, "My name is not spelled with a Z." That would of course be followed by a variety of other questions,

depending on the person; the polite version would be, "What in the heck does that mean?"

He would then go on to educate them that his name was spelled with an S, not a Z. This usually got a shrug. He would then have to further explain, that the old dude on television spelled his name with a Z. Therefore, he was named after the tree, not some old dude on TV. And of course, this would bring the conversation full circle by their asking, "Why didn't you just say that in the first place?" If Noel were around to hear the question, she would be more than happy to supply the answer, "It's because he is an idiot; that's why."

With the last name of Snow, everyone's first name in Noel's family, including Flake, the family's Frenchie and Angel the angel fish, was a play on their last name. When Noel was in her teens, she used to think that her mother wasn't too bright for someone with the first name Crystal, to get married to someone with the last name of, Snow. She would often think, "She walked right into that one."

Being that Noel was born on Christmas, it was a no brainer for her parents when it was time to choose a name for their daughter.

Later in life, Noel would become distressed after someone she would come to know, under far less than favorable circumstances, would also be from a family with a themed name.

Noel was glad that she didn't fall into the temptation to do the same with her family. With the last name of Flowers, it was bad enough that she

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was 'Christmas Flowers.' She could only imagine the jokes this would have caused for her children if they decided to go with a theme. But as it turned out, Noel and Kyle didn't have to worry too much about it; being that their son, Dylan, was their only child.

Noel's parents did the best they could, to install their faith in their children. However, despite growing up in church, going to a private school, and her parents taking Noel and Fraser to youth group, Noel rebelled against them and God as she got older. Despite much protest from her parents and grandparents, Noel married her high school sweetheart, who grew up in a family that did their best to avoid all things Christian.

As a young woman, Noel would tell herself that it wasn't important that her husband didn't go to church, because if religion ever became important to her again, she would be able to convert Kyle.

Unfortunately for Noel, she found out the hard way that it is God who converts and saves souls, not people. Thus, after having Dylan, when religion did become important to her once again, she discovered that it was an endless battle trying to convert Kyle. And what made things worse, like father, like son, the apple did not fall far from the tree. Dylan was as equally disinterested in his mother's faith as his father.

This burdened Noel immensely. Her heart was deeply saddened by the fact that it was always an uphill battle with Kyle and their son. Noel spent many nights on her knees for them. She would also shed many tears. Noel blamed herself for Dylan's

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lack of a desire to pursue God, seeing that if religion had no meaning to his dad, it shouldn't have any meaning for him, as well. And so Noel had to live with this burden that her husband and only son had nothing to do with her God and only went to church with her twice a year: Christmas and Easter.

Now, with her apron fastened around her waist, Noel left the kitchen and walked over to booth three. By the looks of it, she got there just in time. The man still holding his car keys in his hands was short with her, but ended up giving her his order anyway.

"And would you like any ketchup or hot sauce to go with your eggs?" she asked.

"Tabasco if you have it," snorted the man.

"We do," replied Noel.

She returned to the kitchen. "Two number fives."

"Geesh, isn't there anything else on the menu? That's the twentieth time today that I had to make that slop."

"Shh. Don't let them hear that you refer to our food as slop."

He smiled; she frowned.

"So, were there a lot of local celebrities at the funeral? Big news crews with cameras and stuff?" Kyle asked.

"Wake."

"*Whatevs*."

"No. Come to think of it, there wasn't. Maybe they are planning to go the *funeral*, which takes place *tomorrow*."

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"Maybe. Or better yet, maybe they are all like your handsome hunk and only go to church twice a year. What is that you like to call me? Your *cheesestir*?"

"Chreaster. Not cheesestir," Noel corrected her husband.

"What's the difference?"

"Chreaster stands for someone that only goes to church on Christmas and Easter. Cheesestir sounds like someone that likes to eat cheese. Hmm, although, come to think of it, that describes you too," quipped Noel.

Kyle pats his stomach, "You got it babe. 220 pounds of Wisconsin's finest cheddar, baby."

"220 pounds of…" Noel purposely paused so that her husband could get in the last word.

"Hey, watch it church girl. Don't go down the dark path and say something that you will have to confess later to the priest."

"Err, you know very well that I'm not Catholic."

"*Whatevs*."

Noel shook her head in frustration and went to greet a couple that just came in. As she was taking their order, the door opened again, and in came Dylan with two of his friends. The smile on her face after seeing her son faded when she saw that he was still hanging out with his friend Seth, the boy that was recently released from juvenile correction for stealing a car.

"Hi mom."

"What? No hug, no kiss?" replied Noel.

Kyle stuck his head through the serving window

between the kitchen and the restaurant, "Is that my worthless son that I hear?"

"It's nice to see you too pops."

"Don't *pops* me. Why aren't you here working today like you were supposed to be?"

"Serious? I'm starting to wonder about you old man. Did you seriously forget that you lost that last game on Saturday, and with that, I won the bet that allowed me to have the day off? Dude, you are getting forgetful in your old age."

Noel didn't care for the way her son and husband bantered. She interrupted them, "Hungry, Dear?"

"Starved, mom. How about a couple of number fives for me and Seth. Justin doesn't eat eggs, so can you just bring him some ham, hash, and toast?"

Justin spoke up, "Hash? You guys have hash?"

Dylan punched him hard in the arm, "Shut up stupid."

Noel smiled, but deep inside she hurt for her son and prayed silently for him. He was too much like his father. Dylan had all of her good traits (except the most important, her faith) and all of Kyle's bad ones, especially his lack of faith. "Lack of faith," she thought, there was no faith at all in either of the men in her life. In fact, she was almost certain that while they spent time together in the man cave, doing whatever they did down there, they secretly hated God and probably had some secret handshake that they worked on.

Seth, wearing his ear buds was singing along to what he was listening to. "…dirty deeds and there

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done dirt cheap…" Dylan mocked him, "Since when did you start listening to classic rock? I thought that you liked that hip hop garbage."

"I don't know. Not long, I guess. I'm not sure if I like it. These guys are old."

"Sure they're old, that's why it's called classic. They are probably even older than my dad."

"I can hear you," came a voice from the kitchen.

Dylan shot back, "That's a shocker."

"*Whatevs*."

Dylan rolled his eyes and thought, "If that is what I sound like; I have got to come up with something new." He decided to ask his friends about it. They just laughed.

Then Seth asked, "So, how did you come up with that anyway?"

"I once met a girl near a ski hill in Aspen that said it."

This brought an onslaught of questions from Justin and Seth. Everything from, "Was she pretty?" to "Does she have a sister?"

So, wanting to or not, Dylan decided it would be easier if he just told the *'whatevs girl'* story from start to finish.

"All right, all right fine. Calm down, you dorks, and I'll tell you all about it."

Justin asked, "Everything?"

Seth grinned, "I doubt there is much to tell."

"And you would be right. So do you still want me to tell you guys about it or not?" Dylan jeered back.

Justin told Seth to keep quiet because he wanted

to hear what Dylan had to say. Seth shot him a look that was meant to intimidate him, but Justin dismissed it and turned his attention back to Dylan, "Never mind him; talk."

"Okay, okay. So, one Christmas a few years back, my mom somehow convinced my dad to let Beatrice, Vergil, and Carol run things at the diner, so that we could take a family vacation. To top it off, she was able to convince my old man to fork up enough dough, to take a real family vacation. Knowing how much I like to ski, she suggested that we should go somewhere in the Rockies. When he heard this, my dad about had a stroke, but he eventually warmed up to the idea. Plus, it didn't hurt that one of the regulars, old man Becker, had a time share condo in Aspen."

"How do you share time?"asked Justin.

Seth rolled his eyes.

Dylan ignored him and continued with his story, "So, while we were out in Aspen, I was in this little pizza, pub when I spotted her sitting at a table across the way from me. I didn't give her much thought at first because she was sitting with some guy. But when I saw that she smacked him over the head with her gloves, I thought that he is either her brother or their relationship wasn't that good. So I flipped a coin in my head and went with the guy being her brother and went over to ask if I could borrow their hot pepper."

Seth asked, "Was he her brother?"

"Yup."

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"Lucky for you. Otherwise, it might not have turned out that good for you. I've heard stories about guys ambushing other guys that hit on their girlfriends in small towns out west. Sometimes they don't find the body until spring when all the snow melts," supplied Justin.

Seth, taken aback by Justin's ridiculous remark, asked, "Are you sure your mother didn't drop you as a kid?" He turned his attention back to Dylan, "Forget this idiot. And? Then what happened?"

"And as I said, she was sitting with her brother. I cannot say that it wasn't awkward at first and that I didn't take a risk by going there because he looked like he could handle his own. However, I put two and two together when I saw this older dude that was sitting at a nearby table. He was always glancing over at their table. At first I thought that he was some kind of perv with a crush on a younger chick. But, being that the ski girl looked a lot like the lady he was with, I figured that the older dude had to be their dad."

"So what happed?" asked Seth.

"Well, she said sure, but only if I could settle a bet first. She went on to tell me that her brother said that most teenage guys would rather drive a Mustang over a Corvette."

"What did you say?" Justin asked.

"What do you think I said? I went with the Corvette. If I agreed with him, she most likely would not have handed me the hot peppers and that would have been it. End of story. But when I said Corvette,

'whack' she hit him again on the head with her gloves and said, "See? Told you. You big dummy.""

Seth and Justin laughed.

Continuing with his story, Dylan told his friends, "The lady at the next table cleared her throat and shook her head slightly, obviously warning them that they were on thin ice."

Justin, putting in his two cents, "Yeah, when moms do that, it means they want their children to shut up or to quit doing something."

"Wow dude, we cannot get anything past you," Seth said laughing, then looked back at Dylan and asked, "So then what?"

"Well, I introduced myself. I told them that I was by myself and asked if they could use some company. She was hesitant at first, but not hearing any rejections coming from the other table; she slid over, and I sat down. We talked for about an hour or so. Her parents went over to talk to the owner, and then yelled over to our table that it was time for them to go."

"And?"

"And that was it. I never saw her again."

Justin remarked, "Oh, and you call me an idiot."

Seth asked, "That was it? You never saw or heard from her again?"

"Well, yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"I didn't even know her name until just recently."

"She didn't tell you her name?"

"No. When I asked, she just said that if it were

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meant to be, I would find her someday and then I would know her name."

Justin said, "Wow, that's weird, dude."

"Yeah. Totally," agreed Dylan. "She said that it was from a line or something like that from her aunt's favorite movie, Sir-whip-in-do-it-tee or something like that."

Seth jumped in, "What's the yes part?"

"I stumbled across her on Facebook. A friend of a friend, of a friend, kind of thing."

Seth agreed, "Yup. If you drill down far enough, you'll see that we are all connected. I think they call it six degrees of something."

"Separation," Dylan supplied.

"Yeah, that's it."

Justin asked, "Are you planning to hook up now that you know her name?"

"No way man. I found out that she is bad news."

"What? Why not? What kind of bad news? I thought you said she was good looking," demanded Seth.

"She was; is."

Justin asked, "What's her problem then? Why is she bad news? Maybe your bad news ain't all that bad and I'll hook up with her instead."

"She is a Christian," replied Dylan.

Both friends said together, "Oh, dude. So sorry."

Justin changed his mind, "Count me out."

"Tell me about it," agreed Dylan.

"What a waste of a hot chick," said Justin.

Seth agreed, "No doubt."

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"Oh well, that's a dead end," said Justin.

"Yup. Dead," Dylan agreed.

Noel walked up to their table.

"Here you boys go. Enjoy," she said as she gave the three friends their orders.

The way the three of them hushed up when she walked up to their table made her feel as if they were up to something bad. Mother's intuition she said to herself.

The boys stayed for a short time after they finished eating. Sitting there talking, laughing, and ogling pretty girls that walked by.

And as they did, Noel prayed harder and harder. "Please Lord, please deliver my son from his hardened heart and rescue him from his friends. Save him. Save all of them. Please let Dylan see your hand at work so that he may know you as I do. Don't give up on him, Lord. Let him see and experience that you are real and that you love him."

After a while, Dylan started to get antsy. "Son's intuition," he thought to himself. "My mom must be praying for me again." And so he decided it was time to get moving, "Come on boys, let's blow this joint."

"Wait. What? You got a…"

Before Justin could finish his question, Dylan gave him a punch to the arm.

"Dude, stop hitting me," Justin whined.

Dylan ignoring his friend's protest, "Later mom."

"No kiss?" she asked.

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Dylan kissed his hand and blew it in her direction. She caught it and smiled.

"Probably won't be home till late, so don't wait up."

"You know the rules," his dad barked from the kitchen.

"Yah, yah, *whatevs*…" Dylan tried to stop himself, but the word just rolled off his tongue, so he quickly added, "Later."

The three friends walked to Dylan's car; a blue Chevy Impala, that sported a, 'I Brake For Hallucinations' bumper sticker, without saying much. They got in and started off down toward Steve's house, a guy that Seth met while they were in juvie together.

"Now, don't forget what I told you guys about Steve. He does not like to be teased about his name," and then he corrected himself, "Well, none of his family's names, actually."

Justin asked, "Am I missing something? I don't recall hearing about this Steve dude other than you met him in Juvie."

Dylan said, "Yeah, that's right. You weren't along with us when we talked about his family the other day. You were on some date or something like that."

Seth asked, "A date? Who do you know that would go out with you?"

Justin shot back, "Your sister."

"Um, that would be funny, if my sister wasn't nine years old."

"Okay, it was your mom."

Seth looked like he just bit into something sour, "Eww, dude that's nasty. I wouldn't do that if I were you. You might get some disease."

Justin burst out laughing, but Dylan looked appalled and asked Seth, "How come you talk so nasty about your mom all the time?"

"Newsflash, Dylan. My mom is no saint. She's no Bible Thumper like your mom. Heck, I doubt she'd ever been in a church or would recognize a Bible if she saw one."

Dylan, not convinced that Seth had no feelings for his mom, just looked at Seth.

Seth, realizing this went on to say, "Hey, when she starts showing me that she gives a crap about me, then I will do likewise. But until then, all she is to me is someone that I can bum cigarettes from and a source of cash whenever I can find her purse lying around. Besides, you talk bad about your mom too, Dylan. So stop acting holier than thou, and don't give me advice on how I should talk about my mom."

Seth was more convincing this time, and Dylan felt embarrassed that his friend called him out on how he talked about his mom, but he pushed back anyway with, "Well, sure you're right. I do talk bad about my mom. But that's just because I like to make fun of her religion and stuff. I don't hate her or anything. I just think she is not very smart by falling for that religious bologna."

"Hey, I wish the both of you would stop talking

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bad about my girlfriends," Justin said, trying to break the tension between his two friends.

Seth leaned over the front seat to hit Justin, but Justin moved just in time as he heard Seth's fist slam into the seat next to him.

Both boys exchanged a few comments:

"Jerk."

"Dummy."

"Stupid."

"Mama's boy."

"Idiot."

"Serendipity."

Dylan was about to interrupt their childish name calling spat, but was struck with a moment of such clarity that it almost made him drive off the road. Seth meanwhile, just looked at Justin as if he totally lost it.

"What was that? What was the last thing you just said?" Dylan asked Justin.

"Serendipity. The name of the movie you were talking about. The movie that the ski girl's aunt liked is called, Serendipity."

Seth was about to call Justin some more names, but had to shake his head when Dylan told him, "Yeah, that's it."

"See? Told you I wasn't dumb," Justin said to Seth and then stuck out his tongue.

Seth shot back, "Even a blind dog get's a bone from time to time, stupid."

"Jerk."

"Dummy."

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"Okay, now you two are getting on my nerves," Dylan cut in. And then continued on with, "So anyway, Justin, back to this Steve character. This guy's family is really whacked. I use to think that my mom's family was messed up with their name thing, but this dude's family makes her family look normal." Dylan then looked over at Seth, "Go ahead, tell Justin about this guy's messed up family."

Seth thought briefly about another punch attempt or a few more names, but he agreed with Dylan and thought it would be wise to tell Justin about his friend and figured he would end up getting him back sooner or later.

"Yeah, that's a good idea. Listen up dummy. Like I was telling Dylan, Steve's entire family revolves around ESPN."

"So, I watch that too. What's the big deal about that?"

"Listen, and I will tell you," barked Seth.

"Okay, okay. Tell me."

"Steve's last name is, Espenson."

Justin shrugged his shoulders, "And? So?"

"You don't get it?" Seth asked, but not totally surprised. "His last name is spelled, ***E S P*** e ***N*** son."

"Oh, I see; ESPN. Whoa, that's cool." Justin said with excitement in his voice as if he just discovered something great.

"Oh, that is only half of it. Steve's middle name is Levy." Seth let Justin take this in for a few seconds.

"Steve Levy Espenson? As in Steve Levy from

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ESPN?" asked Justin as it dawned on him how horrible that would be.

"Yeah, as in Steve Levy from ESPN. Dude, did your mom drop you as a kid? You really are slow."

Coming to Justin's defense, Dylan said, "Come on, cut him some slack. I didn't get it right away either."

"That's because of the condition that you were in when I told you. What's his excuse?"

"Your mom thinks I'm special."

"Oh, you're special all right. And, like I told you, mom jokes are only funny if you care about your mom. And since I don't; fire away."

Justin raised his eyebrows, "Geesh, someone needs a hug."

Seth, trying not to laugh, decided to join in on Justin's mom jokes, "Nah, your mom hugs me all the time."

The three boys laughed at this, but Dylan quickly changed back to the topic at hand. "So, tell Justin about Steve's brothers and sister."

"His brother's first and middle names are Neil Everett, Stan Verrett, and Stuart Scott. And his sister is Linda Cohn."

"Those are all names of Sports Center anchors from ESPN," commented Justin.

"Duh," combated Seth. Then continued, "And that's not all."

"It gets worse?" asked Justin.

Dylan supplied, "Much."

Seth agreed, "Much. Their Rottweiler is called

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Espy. Their mailbox has all of these little college football helmet stickers all over it. Their doorbell is the Sports Center's theme song. They have tons of sports related junk all throughout the home. And the worse of it all, his dad's first name is Chris. And when he turned 18, he legally changed his middle name to Berman and his mom changed her first name to Deportes, after they got married."

"No way. You're the one who is stupid if you think that I am going to believe that, "remarked Justin.

"Believe it. It's true. All of it," said Seth with no hint of the slightest of smiles.

"Man, if this is all true, this poor kid is messed up, for real. That's worse than having Flowers as your last name. Sorry, Dylan, no offense."

Dylan smiled, "You think?"

"I'm telling you, it's all true. And now you can see why he doesn't like people messing around by making jokes about it. In fact, he is a little more than what you might call, on edge about it."

"Isn't that whacked?" said Dylan.

"Big time," agreed Justin.

The three friends continued to talk about Steve's messed up family for the remainder of the ride to his house. As they pulled up, the first thing Justin saw was their mailbox in its sticker glory. Seth looked back at Justin with an I-told-you-so, look on his face. Justin just shook his head.

"Are we going inside?" asked Dylan.

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"Nah, I don't think that's a good idea," replied Seth.

"Bummer," said Justin. "I wanted to see if he has any vintage Jordan pics."

"Oh, trust me, they have em. It's like a sports freak show inside his house." Seth paused and then reminded Dylan and Justin to keep it cool when they meet Steve. "No jokes! None! Got it?"

Dylan said, "*Whatevs*."

Justin agreed, "Fine. What he said," as he pointed to Dylan.

Seth went to the door and in a few moments it opened. He walked in. Justin held his head out the window, straining to hear the doorbell, but he could only hear the nearby traffic.

After about fifteen minutes, Seth and Steve left the house and walked up to the car. They got in, and Dylan backed out of the driveway, then he headed toward town.

"Hey guys, this is my friend Steve."

"Hey Steve," replied Dylan and Justin.

"Steve, this is Dylan," nodding his head toward his friend. "And the clown sitting next to you is Justin."

Justin and Steve nodded toward each other. A smile crossed Justin's face, but when he caught Seth's eye, the smile vanished. Seth relaxed a little and turned back toward the front of the car.

The four boys made many stops as they drove around town. They pulled into a BP station so that

Justin could use the restroom and Dylan could fill up 'The Beast.' Seth got out so that he could get some cash from the TYME Machine. Steve just sat in the back seat, texting.

When the three friends were back in the car, Dylan pulled out of the gas station and asked, "Where to?"

Seth looked back to Steve, "Did you hear anything yet?"

"Not yet. But I'm checking with another source."

Not knowing where else to go, Dylan drove to the mall. The four boys got out and went inside. Everything was going well until they decided to go to the food court. While they were sitting at a table gulping down tacos and slurping up Mountain Dew, another group of boys saw Steve and made their way over to their table.

"Hey, ESPN, "said the first boy.

"Na na na, na na na," said the second.

"Live from Wausau, it's Sports Center," joked the third.

The fourth and fifth boys just laughed.

Steve, ignoring their comments said, "Girls."

Dylan laughed, and that earned him a few glances from the new group. He just stared at them, but said nothing. They turned their attention back to Steve. "So who's your friends? More sports nuts?" asked the second boy.

"Not that it is any of your business; this is Seth, Justin, and Dylan."

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The three friends just sat there saying nothing and didn't acknowledge the other boys. After the first group of boys sized up Dylan, Seth, and Justin; they decided even with one extra guy it wouldn't be a good idea to start anything. So after a few more wisecracks at Steve's expense, they left.

Not knowing if he could count on Dylan and Justin to back him up, suited Steve just fine for their unwillingness to start something. He already knew from Juvie, that Seth could take care of himself, but he wasn't so sure about the other two. To Steve, Dylan looked to be a goody-goody, and he gave him an uneasy feeling. As if he had some sort of secret or something. Whatever it was, he told himself that if Dylan did anything to warrant a beating, he would unleash Hell on this kid before he knew what hit him.

A little while after the second group of boys left, Steve, got the text he was waiting for. They finished up their lunch, bought a couple of Red Bulls from the newsstand, and then headed back to the car.

Steve gave them directions to the store where a guy came out to meet them. They bought what they intended to buy and drove off to smoke what they intended to smoke. Afterward, the four boys hung out for a few hours more. But when their heads started to clear back to normal, they started getting bored. So, Dylan drove them home one by one.

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He dropped off Justin first. And though he hardly knew Steve at all, he dropped off Seth next because it would've been too far out of his way to drop Steve off before Seth. And Dylan wasn't feeling up to backtracking to get home.

So, after the two boys had said their goodbyes to Seth, Dylan headed towards Steve's house.

Just when Steve was relaxing and thought that maybe he was wrong about Dylan, Dylan ignored Seth's warning and made the mistake of his life by asking Steve about his name.

Dylan had no clue how much Steve was boiling inside. Therefore, when Steve invited Dylan into the house, Dylan had no way to know that Steve was planning his revenge.

Once inside, it was too overwhelming for Dylan, and he let the jokes fly out one after another.

While they were in Steve's house; two things happened: One, Dylan thought Seth was overreacting about Steve's sensitivity toward his name. The other, Steve was able to form a plan in his head and knew exactly how to strike Dylan so that neither he nor anyone else, would ever again make the same mistake. Once and for all, he would put an end to this nightmare of people making jokes about his name.

But being as shrewd as he was, something he learned to do in juvie, Steve never let on to Dylan that all of this was upsetting him. Thus, when Steve told Dylan that he was getting a second wind and knew where he could make an easy score, Dylan, unexpectedly went along with Steve's plan.

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Steve told Dylan he had to get something from the basement and said for him to hang out in the kitchen until he came back. So, Dylan sat at the table to chat with Steve's older sister, Linda and their younger brother Stuart.

He was still talking to them when Steve emerged from the basement. Dylan thought that it was a little warm to be wearing a jacket, but decided not to ask Steve about it.

Back in the car again, Dylan said to Steve, "I like your family."

"Me too," replied Steve.

Dylan's laugh that followed nearly gave away Steve's anger. However, instead of letting his anger show, he asked, "What so funny?"

"Nothing. It's just Seth, Justin, and I was talking about that earlier today." Dylan felt a little awkward now and felt that he needed to offer an explanation to Steve.

"You said, 'Me too' and I was telling the guys earlier that I met this girl at a ski hill, and her brother said that a few times when I was talking with them. And each time he said it, she smacked him on the head with her gloves and told him to stop copying."

Dylan, satisfied that Steve accepted his explanation, eased up a little. Steve just smiled and nodded his head. But what was going on inside, was anything but a smile.

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Wanting to change the subject, and fast, Dylan asked, "So where are we going? Where is this friend of yours?"

"Culvers," Steve said unemotionally.

"Oh, cool. I could go for some custard."

The two boys drove the rest of the way in silence as they listened to the town's only classic rock station. And as they listened to, *Sweet Child O' Mine,* Dylan wondered to himself, "Since when is Guns N' Roses considered classic rock?"

The two boys went inside, ordered a couple of desserts and then sat a table. A few minutes later, a guy approached them with the custards and a little something extra wrapped in tin foil that he gave to Steve.

When they finished their desserts, Steve, wanting to get on with his plan, suggested that they split. So they got up, went back to the car, and got in. Then, Dylan unknowingly drove to the place where Steve could execute his plan.

"I've never been down this road before," commented Dylan. "Where does it end up?"

Steve smiled, "It's a dead end." Then he added, "It ends at a nice, and quiet place where there is no one around." As Steve said this, he was thinking, "So I can put a bullet in your head and there will be no witness."

The road ended at a small abandoned boat launch just as Steve said. And as he was hoping; there was

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no one in sight. This made both boys feel relieved, but for different reasons.

Dylan turned off the engine, but kept the ignition turned to auxiliary so that they could continue to listen to the radio.

Steve, on the other hand was about to graduate from Steve the car thief to Steve the murderer. And so, instead of pulling out the little tin foil packet that his friend gave him at Culvers, Steve pulled out something that shocked Dylan and made him gasp.

"What are you planning to do with that?" Dylan asked, as he motioned toward the gun in Steve's hand.

Steve opened the car door, pointed the gun at Dylan, shut the door, and walked around the back of the car. Then he walked up to the driver's door where Dylan sat the whole time stunned at the fact that someone was pointing a gun at him.

On the radio, War's, *Low Rider,* finished playing and a song from, Three Dog Night started to play:

Mama told me not to come
Mama told me not to come
"That ain't the way to have fun, son"
"That ain't the way to have fun, son"

As Dylan sat there he wondered if he would ever see his mother again. And though he didn't know it at the time, he would, but not in the way or place that he was thinking.

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"You see, all my life I had to deal with little imps like you," Steve addressed Dylan. "So, tonight I decided it was time to make my statement to the world. My mark. My meaning in life. My legacy and fifteen minutes of fame. And you, my *friend,"*(Dylan didn't like the way Steve used the word *friend)* "…are the last straw. And later, after I come down from this," Steve was holding up the tin foil in his other hand. "I'll go down to the police station and tell them what I did and where they need to go to find your body."

A tear formed in the corner of Dylan's eye as his question was answered as he thought, "No, I'm not going to see my mom. I'll never see my dad or any of my friends, ever again."

Mama told me not to come
Mama told me not to come
"That ain't the way to have fun, son"
"That ain't the way to have fun, son"

Dylan tried to collect his emotions the best that he could and pleaded with Steve. It was of no use. Steve had already decided what he was going to do and a split second before he pulled the trigger, the car lit up as bright as the sun but it only lasted a millionth of a second.

It took years and many visits from an unlikely visitor for Steve to come to the realization that it actually did happen, and it was not part of the flash that came from the end of the barrel of the gun in his hand.

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Click. BANG!

And just like that, Dylan breathed his last.

Anyone that would have seen the inside of the car before Dylan got shot would have seen the same brilliant light for a fraction of a second right before the bullet entered Dylan's brain. But there was no one else around to see it—at least no one human.

Dylan's head slumped in front of him, as it rest on the steering wheel. Steve looked at his handy work and smiled.

True to his word, the next day Steve made his way into town. As he walked up to the front door of the police station, he opened the door for a woman and her husband coming out. They just spent the last hour and a half filling out a missing persons report for their son.

In walked Steve.

He went up to the front desk, and asked to speak to an officer because he wanted to report a crime. He was escorted to a desk in the back of the room. The nameplate on the desk read Sgt. Denny.

"What can I do you for?" asked the officer sitting at the desk as he pushed the missing person report to the side.

If Steve would have been more observant, he would have easily seen and recognized the first name on the folder. But he didn't, and so Steve just grinned at Denny and said nothing at first.

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"So, how can I help you, son? I'm a working man, and I don't have all day," Denny said, looking halfway between disinterested and annoyed to have to talk to a teenage boy that wanted to report a crime. Sgt. Denny thought to himself, "I hope this kid makes it quick; I have important business to take care of at Dave's Barbershop right after I take this missing persons joke of a file and drop it off to that rookie moron. Let him chase his tail, trying to track down some stupid teenage idiot that is obviously too drunk to make it home or shacking up at his girlfriends or probably even both. Missing persons. What a joke. How can his parents be so naïve to think that their little Dylan is not the little angel they think he is?"

"I want to report a crime. A murder," replied Steve.

This aroused Denny's curiosity, "A murder, huh. Okay, let's hear about it. Tell me about this murder. We're talking about a person, a real person right?"

Steve looked at Sgt. Denny with the same disgusted look of contempt that most people do when talking to the sergeant. Denny, apparently used to the looks of this nature, was not phased at all.

"So come on with it, spit it out, I don't have time for games here. We are real busy down here. So if you got something to say, let's hear it. How do you know someone was killed and who are they?"

"His name is Dylan something."

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This got Denny's full attention now, and he sat up straighter, still slouching but straighter.

"What? What did you say this person's name is?" At this point Sgt. Denny unlatched his revolver and put his hand firmly on the grip.

"I don't know his last name, but his first name is, well…it was Dylan. And I know he was killed because I am the one who shot him."

Before Steve could say another word, the sergeant pulled out his gun and pointed it directly toward Steve. Then he got up, went around his desk and stood behind Steve, and took out his handcuffs with his free hand. The whole time Denny was thinking, "If this little smart mouthed punk is telling the truth, it's going to look pretty good capturing a murderer and solving a missing person's case all at the same time. Who knows, I just might make lieutenant after all."

"Okay, you little turd, put your hands behind your back. Slowly. I don't know what kind of stunt you think that you're pulling, but for your sake, this better be true. I don't have any time to play games with little turds like you."

Steve yawned and did what Sgt. Denny was telling him to do. Once Denny had the cuffs on Steve, he called down the hall for the rookie to get his rear over to his desk right away.

After the rookie finally got there, Denny told him to take Steve into the integration room.

When the rookie asked, "We have one of those here?" Sgt. Denny almost blew a gasket and kicked

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his garbage can half way across the room. "Listen here you little piss ant useless, good for nothing disgrace to the badge. Take him down the hall to the break room where we do all of our interrogations. If that isn't too hard for you."

The rookie wasn't threatened by Sgt. Denny's outburst and looked a little too leisurely for Denny's liking; which earned him another earful of insults and a lengthy swearing rampage.

"Yes boss. Right away boss," the rookie said, still unmoved and unconcerned about the sergeant's rant.

Denny made a mental note of it and figured he would make the piss ant pay for his lack of respect. But he told himself it will have to wait. First things first. He picked up the file that read, Dylan Flowers and followed the rookie and Steve to the interrogating room.

When he got there, Denny kicked out the two officers that were in the break room, telling them to drink their coffee somewhere else because he was working on a high profile case and was about to book a dangerous criminal and close a missing persons case all at the same time.

When he added that what he was about to do in one morning, the two of them weren't capable of doing in a week; they rolled their eyes. They looked at Steve and saw him as nothing more than a misguided teen; certainly not a dangerous criminal. However, the officers left the room all the same. But it was not because Sgt. Denny barked out his orders for them to leave. They left because they figured that

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if he were going to be there, they would rather be somewhere else.

As they left, the looks on their faces indicated they were both thinking the same thing. They doubted that Denny was cable of solving anything more complicated than using the Keurig machine, and the most work he ever did in one morning was filling out his lottery number pick sheet.

Once Denny had the break room to himself and the useless rookie; he sat down across from Steve to start his interrogation.

"Okay, you little punk, tell me about this murder. I want to know everything about how you killed Dylan Flowers. And don't think for a moment that you can hide anything from me. I didn't make sergeant by *not* being the best interrogator on the force."

Before Steve could answer, Denny turned to the rookie, and pointed his fat finger at him as he told him, "Pay attention. You are about to see the master at work. And whatever you do, keep your trap shut. Your job is to sit there taking notes. I'll do all the work. I'll show you how real police work is done. Am I making myself clear?"

The rookie didn't acknowledge the sergeant. But this didn't bother Denny much; he figured that the little piss ant was too frightened to say anything. So he turned his attention back to his criminal. "All right, let's hear what you have to say."

Before answering the sergeant's question, two

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thoughts came to Steve: One, "His last name was Flowers? What a pansy." Two, "Interrogation? What interrogation? I'm volunteering all that they need to know."

After chuckling a few times, Steve told the sergeant everything he wanted to hear, "Well, there is not much to tell you about the guy because I just met him yesterday. I didn't even know his last name until just now. Which is too bad for him, because if I knew that his last name was Flowers, I probably wouldn't have been so eager to kill him."

Denny, looking disinterested and wanting to get on with solving his murder mystery (that he fantasized it to be) said, "Yeah, whatever. Just tell me the details. Where did this happen and where is his body right now?"

For the next ninety minutes, Steve kept the facts coming one after another and disclosed all of the information that he needed to disclose to make sure that even some half baked nitwit of a cop like Sgt. Denny couldn't screw up his chance to earn him his fifteen minutes of fame.

When he was finished, and he answered every question that the sergeant threw at him, Denny, looking very pleased with his keen interrogation skills sat back and laced his hands behind his head and looked over to the rookie.

"Now… that's how it's done. You just witnessed top shelf police work, son."

The look on the rookie's face was one similar to

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someone suffering with consumption, as he thought to himself, "Really? Is it that easy to make sergeant around here? Man, I'll be lieutenant before I'm thirty."

If the rookie's facial expression bothered Denny, he didn't let on.

The next few hours flew by as they got Steve safely behind bars and verified his story. The two police officers that were chased out of the break room were the ones tasked to investigate the crime scene.

After they got over the initial shock that the sergeant had something to do with an actual case, they called the coroner.

Meanwhile, back at the police station, Sgt. Denny was about to do something that he rarely did in his life; he was about to act like a true caring person. He grabbed his hat and went out the door, and though he was feeling pretty good about himself, the thought of telling the Flowers the news about their son, tugged at his heartstrings.

And being that this was well beyond Dylan's nature, not to come home or call, Kyle let Beatrice and Vergil run the diner, so that he could be home when Dylan got there. This would turn out to be a good decision on his part, being that not everyone reacts to horrific news in the same way. And thus, Kyle's inability to handle the tragic news, as well as his wife, helped keep Denny from getting too caught

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up in his emotions. Which was a good thing for him, because the little heartstrings that he did have, were quite small and fragile.

As Sgt. Denny pulled into the Flowers driveway, he double checked the address. Seeing that he was at the correct address, he got out of his car, and walked up to the front door.

Noel went to the door immediately. But when she saw the officer at her door without her son, her heart sank. Before opening the door to speak with the officer, the same one that she doubted his belief that their son was actually missing and not out drunk somewhere; she prayed a quick prayer. "Please, please, please, Lord, don't let it be what I fear. Oh, Lord, please. And if it is, please give me the strength to deal with whatever it is he is about to tell me." With that, she opened the door and asked Sgt. Denny if they had found their son.

"Well, yes mam, we ah, may I come in?"

Noel took a few steps back without looking, so that she could let the officer into her home. Denny stepped into the Flowers' home and removed his baseball cap styled police cap.

But just as Denny was about to continue with his answer to Mrs. Flower's question, Kyle joined them at the door. "Mam, sir, there is no easy way for me to tell you this, but we found your son; dead."

Noel's second part of her prayer was answered; she didn't fall apart, faint, or turn to rage. The same

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could not be said of Kyle. While she stood there with her hands over her mouth and tears streaming down her face, with a flood of questions rushing through her head, Kyle turned to her and started shouting at her about her useless god.

"How can you worship a heartless god? Do you now see that he doesn't exist? And if he does, he is heartless and evil to take our son away from us."

Kyle went on ranting for nearly two more minutes while Denny and Noel just stared at him. Denny looked back and forth at Noel and Kyle as one watching a tennis match. And though Noel was visibly shaken up by the news, Kyle was on the verge of losing it entirely.

After the initial shock of Kyle's uncontrolled outburst, Denny's wits returned back to him, which propelled him to interrupt Kyle. He had one idea in his head, "I am not about to play domestic peace maker." So, he held up his hand toward Kyle and said, "Please sir, let me finish."

Kyle's rampage turned into deep sobs. It was not exactly the quiet Denny was looking for, but he figured as long as he didn't have to referee a domestic dispute, he could deal with the sobbing.

Denny told the Flowers everything that he knew about the death of their son. He explained how he was able to get the information from the boy that confessed to his murder. And he even stayed to answer several of their questions. But as soon as Kyle started up his, 'I hate god machine', Denny

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figured that he did his duty and told the Flowers that he had some follow up work to do, regarding this case. In Denny's head, this translated to, "I need to get to the barbershop to tell the boys about this." And so he left the Flowers to their misery, their fighting about a useless god, and their many questions to themselves.

After the officer said his good-byes and left their home, Noel shut the door, walked over to the couch and wept. She wept softly for what seemed like hours. However, unlike his wife, Kyle was not in the mood for tears. For a few minutes more, Kyle paced back and forth yelling at God, Noel, and the walls if they were listening, about a god that had no power and no love to allow this to happen.

But when it finally dawned on him that his wife must be as equally upset over the loss of their son, he turned and left the room.

Noel never noticed.

Throughout Kyle's rampage, Noel wept and prayed, all to herself as if Kyle didn't exist. This was the beginning of the end of their one time happy life together.

News of Dylan's death spread fast. The officers at the station told stories to their friends. Their friends told stories to men at barbershops. And at a home nearby, someone named Dan was making his second visit in one week, to break more sad news to the wife of an old friend.

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"Evening, Janice."

"Hello, Dan. Who died?"

"What?" Dan felt bewildered by her ability to see right through him. For whatever reason, she scared him. So, he told himself that he would make this quick, "Oh, um, Dylan Flowers. The boy that was killed yesterday, his name was Dylan Flowers."

"Oh. Did I know him or something?"

"His parents own the diner where Jordan used to meet his project; Adam and David." Dan felt proud of himself to be able to remember both of their names this time.

Janice wanted to correct him, "You mean his friends; not project." But she was too horrified by the fact that she just met the boy's mother yesterday at Adam's wake. And Dan was the one to tell me about both deaths." She thought, "I have to stop answering my door when this man comes to my home." But for the time being, all she wanted to do was process this sad news; and pray.

"Thank you Dan."

"Any time. Say, ah, how is…" before Dan could finish his question, the door shut, leaving Dan standing there alone. He shrugged his shoulders at her abrupt dismissal; on the other hand, he was glad too. He then turned, and headed to spread the news someplace else.

Once Kyle was able to let go of some of his initial anger toward Noel's god, the two of them were able

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to work through the events and details that come with the death of a loved one.

And since people respond in different ways while mourning, there was no right or wrong way for Noel and Kyle to decide what to do with the diner during this time of grief. Naturally, they were closed immediately following Sgt. Denny's visit with the news of their son and it remained closed up until the day they rested his body into the ground at St. Catherine's Cemetery. But right or wrong for anyone else, the Flowers reopened Noel's Diner the following day after the funeral. They both agreed that in order to keep any form of sanity and peace within their marriage, they decided that they must keep moving, or they would go insane. So, that is exactly what they did. And in response to staying open in their difficult time of loss, during the days and weeks that followed, many friends and long time patrons showed up at the diner to pay their respects. They even had several new customers that had never eaten at their diner before; Janice Montgomery was among them.

Janice decided it was time to put aside her feelings of guilt and shame of not being a stronger witness, like her husband and was determined to stand up to her fear of befriending someone simply because they were going through a difficult situation. She had to fight constantly with herself to win this battle, as she tried to convince herself that she was not doing this to make Noel her project, but her friend. Eventually, she would win the fight and they became

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good friends; best friends for life. All it took was for Janice to be obedient to God's leading and take that first step into the diner.

As she opened the door and stepped into the diner for the first time, Janice felt strong. Emotionally, physically, and spiritually; she felt like she could take on the world. She, along with the church prayer chain was in intense prayer for the Flowers. And though Noel went to a different church than Janice, she knew from her conversation with her at Adam's wake, that Noel was a believer. She also learned from that conversation, that her husband was not. But for reasons she could not explain, she had her doubts about their murdered son. She somehow had a peace about Dylan. She wasn't able or ready to share this with Noel, but deep down she knew that there was hope that Dylan was in Heaven.

"Good morning, welcome to Noel's," Noel said mechanically as she grabbed a menu and place setting on her way to greet the customer. Since Noel has done this a thousand times before, she did not recognize Janice at first.

"Hello, Noel," Janice said, trying not to sound overly compassionate or unaware of their loss.

Janice was thankful and confident of her decision to go to the diner as soon as she saw Noel's face light up. It was humbling to Janice. Here was a woman who had just buried her murdered son; and she was smiling.

This made Janice think back to her husband's

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wake where she was actually able to not just smile, but laugh with her husband's *friends*. "Is it possible that we are kindred spirits?" thought Janice.

"Janice, it is so nice to see you."

More confirmation Janice thought. She remembered my name. It would have been hard for Janice, not to know Noel's name being that her and her husband's name have been on the news and in the paper for the past week. But even if they were not, Janice was convinced that she would have still remembered Noel's name because of the first and last conversation the two had just a little shy of two weeks ago.

"Orders up," came an emotionless voice from the kitchen.

"Okay," Noel responded over her shoulder. Then continued her greeting of Janice, "Is this your first time here? You mentioned the name of the diner when we met at um, at Adam's wake, but I didn't recall seeing you in the diner before. So, I wondered later that day, how did you know about the diner?"

Janice followed Noel as she led her to a booth by the window that overlooked the parking lot, a booth that her husband sat at many times before, and the same booth that Adam and David sat at on the day of Jordan's funeral. "Yes. It is my first time here, but my husband came here quite often with his friends."

Later, as the two women became friends, Janice disclosed to Noel that the kind person that she spoke of at Adam's wake was her husband.

During the weeks and months that followed

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Janice's first dining experience at Noel's, she transitioned from customer to friend.

As friends, they discussed many things. And, as friends, Janice learned many things about Noel, her husband, and her son. She learned that although Noel looked like she had it all together on the outside, on the inside, she was bitter; very bitter toward the young man that took her son's life. Wanting to or not, Kyle's frequent rants about her unloving god were allowing a bitterness to take root in Noel's soul.

This concerned Janice tremendously. Many nights as Janice sat alone at her kitchen table reading her Bible; she gained insight and wisdom why she was destined to be friends with Noel, and knew that God was at work. Therefore, Janice resolved to help Noel overcome her bitterness and forgive the man that brought her such deep pain and sorrow; so that her heart would heal.

Another thing she knew, or thought she knew and wanted to achieve, was, Kyle needed men to speak into his life.

The first mission was a success; a huge success. One that Janice couldn't have ever imagined, but would also later lead to an unexpected consequence.

The second mission was a complete failure. Where at one time, Kyle tolerated his wife's religion and would attend church twice a year; following Dylan's death, Kyle's tolerance turned into hatred.

Kyle absolutely hated her god and would shut down anyone that wanted to talk to him about her god; including, and especially his wife.

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At night when the beers would go down one after another, he would often shout at her and her god; saying things like, how could she love and serve a god that was so cruel to take their son's life. And later, as Janice's first mission of helping Noel release the bitterness in her heart, became a success, Kyle found himself hating his wife and her god, more and more each day.

The success of convincing Noel to let go of her bitterness came quickly. In a very short period, Janice led Noel into letting go of her bitterness, but God led Noel to do something more. Noel decided it was one thing to forgive the murderer, which would be good for her soul, but as God ministered to her, she wanted to take the lesson of forgiveness even further. She wanted the man that killed her son to have life; eternal life. She wanted the man to know that not only did Noel forgive him; so did God.

Noel was scared the night before her first visit to the state penitentiary where Steve would live out the remainder of his days for the murder of Dylan Flowers. So she called up her friend and asked if she would drive with her to the prison in the morning. Janice said yes. And as they drove, the two friends prayed and went over a game plan what Noel would say to Steve, depending on his response to her visit.

At first, things did not go well for Noel as she met with Steve, but they went better than she could have expected. By the end of their first meeting,

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she had already made up her mind that she would visit him a second time and hopefully on a regular basis.

For whatever reason, Steve apparently wanted the same. And so, over the period of two years, she brought the killer of her son a Bible and other books for him to read. She even brought Steve Christmas and birthday presents.

Despite her witness to her husband Kyle, how to love and forgive, just the opposite was going on in his heart. To Kyle, forgiveness was reserved for trivial things like when someone stepped on your foot or they took the last donut. And perhaps prior to his son's death, Kyle knew how to forgive someone for more serious offenses, such as when someone cut in front of him in line at the post office. But now that Dylan was dead, all bets were off. He found that the word forgiveness, no longer had any meaning. Therefore, when he learned that his wife was not only able to forgive the killer of his son, but she actually bought him gifts, that drove Kyle over the edge and caused him to purchase his own present; a gun.

So, as the time went by, Noel's visits and love for Steve, led him closer and closer to the realization that the God Noel spoke of, actually cared for him; a killer. But it would take the news of a tragedy for all of the pieces to fall into place that would lead Steve to repent and silently pray for forgiveness as he lay on his bunk in his prison cell.

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Meanwhile, Kyle's plan that he was working on during his drunken stupors was quickly leading him to his hearing before Judge Moses and to the biggest surprise of his life. Too bad for him, his plan would turn out to be the epic failure of all epic failures.

As Kyle's hatred toward Noel and her god grew; their marriage diminished to almost nothing. The same was true for Noel's Diner. He was so enraged on a regular basis that the quality of his cooking took a toll on their business. Customers found egg shells in their omelets, under or overcooked meat, tasteless hash browns, and slower service. It wasn't long before they had to let Beatrice go. And it wasn't long before regulars stopped coming, leaving only foot traffic and their most loyal customers.

But this didn't bother Kyle much. He was no longer living in the real world. The world that he was living in revolved around only death and revenge. All of Kyle's emotions and his plans were driven by three things: One, he was going to put an end to his anger, once and for all. What he planned to do with his gun would make it permanent, something the beer he drank was unable to do. Two, he was going to put an end to Noel's delusions that god was real. When Kyle's plan was complete, his wife would know firsthand that her god didn't exist. Three, just in case she was right, and her god did exist, he would once again be reunited with his unbelieving son; in Hell.

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Thus, when Kyle could take Noel's optimism no longer, the day finally arrived for his court hearing in Heaven. And his son would once again be reunited with one of his parents.

"Listen here woman," Kyle addressed his wife. "I know that I have not been the man you married since the death of my son." Noel was deeply hurt as he said the words, 'my son', but she did not show it. "But it is not just me that had changed. Oh no, dear, you changed too. Before Dylan's death, the thought of giving a murderer Christmas and birthday presents would have never crossed your mind, Noel. And though you are so head over heels in love with this… this god you talk about, the one that took my son, you would have never been strong enough in your faith to forgive an evil murderer."

Noel stood silent as she tried to assess where her husband was going with this new rampage of his and let him continue; uninterrupted. "What did you expect to accomplish by going to that prison to visit the scum that took Dylan's life?" Kyle paused briefly, but seeing that she was not going to engage in this discussion, he continued, "Nothing. That's what you have accomplished. Well, at least with him, the boy that killed my son, you accomplished absolutely nothing. He is, and always will be, a killer. You have accomplished nothing to change that. But… but, on the other hand, with me, well, you just made me realize more and more each day how delusional you really are. This god that you love so much, the one

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that doesn't exist, hates me. And you are too stupid to see that he hates you too. How could you love something so hateful?"

Kyle was actually making sense to Noel at this point as she thought how it was easier to love the killer of their son, than it was to love her husband. So, not knowing what to say she just shrugged her shoulders and said, "I don't know, Kyle. I don't know. But I do know that hatred solves nothing."

"Oh, so you think," barked Kyle. "Is that something your little friend told you? Well, I have a bit of news for you honey, you are done with your time up at the prison. As of today, I have decided that you will no longer disgrace me by visiting your little prison boyfriend." Noel shrunk back from her husband's comments. Over the last two years they had fought more and more frequently, and he had said many mean-spirited things, but today, his words stung more than ever. Now, for the first time his words scared her.

Kyle continued, "Yes, sir, today I woke up and decided that I am tired of this life. I am tired of watching our business fail. I am tired of us. I am tired of you. I am tired of watching you love and forgive someone evil. I'm tired of your friend that fills your head with nonsense. And I'm tired of me being unhappy and you being happy."

Kyle ranted on for several more minutes as he told Noel how 'tired' he was. And as he did this, Noel wondered where it was leading; and so, she prayed. And as she did, she prayed for wisdom as

she addressed her husband, "Kyle, I understand. Trust me, I know how you feel. I miss *our* son too. And my happiness and forgiveness is my choice, just like your unhappiness is your choice."

Noel wasn't very confident that she should have said anything about his state of mind, but he did not appear to respond one way or another as he stared at her; stone-faced and arms crossed. So she continued, "Our son has been dead for two years now; and believe me, it still hurts me deeply. I struggle too, Kyle. It is hard for me not to be depressed and think about it. It is obvious that he was the strength of our marriage and without him we have come to this. But it doesn't have to be this way. You too can choose joy. You too could choose forgiveness. You too could choose life."

As Noel's words hung in the air, she waited to see how he would respond. It turned out that they were the straw that broke the camel's back and Kyle decided it was time to reveal and execute his plan. It was time to show his cards.

With a smile on his face, he lifted his shirt and pulled out the gun that was tucked into his pants. The sight of the gun, made Noel, shiver. The thought came to her mind that just two years ago, her son was faced with the same terror. She didn't know if the gun were meant for him, for her, or both.

The smell of alcohol that oozed from Kyle's pores was equally as rancid as the smell of his breath. He stood there waving the gun about as he studied her face. The look in his eyes saddened Noel. She

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wondered what she had done in life that she would have to be disciplined by God to the point that He took her son, and by the look in Kyle's eyes, He took her husband too. But even during this, she realized that it was not true, God was not disciplining her. He was allowing it, but it was not because of something she had done wrong and thus deserved to be disciplined. So, she prayed, "I'm sorry Lord for making this about myself. I will never be able to comprehend the depths of your love for me. And I don't know what happened to the man that I married, but I know if you wanted, you could deliver us from this, and change his heart so that he too can love you as I do."

When Noel finished praying she said her last words to Kyle, "I forgive you."

Her words stung Kyle deeply. And as he slowly shook his head from side to side, he couldn't imagine how he let this go on for as long as it had. His wife's last words to him, revealed the evidence that he needed to know—she was beyond hope. She was just as equally gone as he was. So why put it off any longer?

Kyle lifted the gun eye level with Noel, clicked off the safety with his thumb, and said, "Go. Go be with your god."

When he pulled the trigger, the last thing Kyle would see before he turned the gun toward himself was a smile on Noel's face. As Kyle pulled the trigger

for the second and last time that day, the last thought in his head was, "God, I hate you for what you have done to me."

Both the gun and Kyle's body dropped to the floor just feet away from his high school sweetheart.

When Janice went to the diner the next morning, she had a horrific headache. She did not sleep well during the night. And when she did, she had strange dreams about swimming in pools of blood. She did her best to chase away the dreams and was looking forward to seeing her friend.

But the door was locked. The lights in the diner were off, and the sign read closed. This made the dreams of blood swimming pools, come crashing into her head; making it hurt all the more. She stood there for a few moments trying to remember Noel saying anything about the diner being closed. She knew that they haven't done well lately, but not to the point that they would be closed. Not this quick at least.

When nothing came to mind that would explain the reason for the diner to be closed, Janice walked back to her car, got in, and drove to the Flowers home. When she got there, her head was pounding, and she felt cold. She wondered if she was coming down with something as she dug into her purse, looking for anything to take away her headache. She found an empty bottle at the bottom of her purse. And then remembered that she took the last two pills a week ago and meant to refill the bottle.

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"Stupid me," she thought. "Oh well, I'll just ask Noel for something."

Janice walked up to the front door and rang the doorbell. No one answered. She rang again. Still no answer. She cupped her hands over her eyes and tried to look through the doors small window, but the glass was frosted, and she could not see inside.

So, she dug back into her purse to find her phone. She dialed Noel's cell phone. No answer. She tried their home phone. No answer. She dialed Noel's again, and put her ear to the door, but she couldn't hear it ring. Still no answer.

Her headache was in full gear now, which made it difficult for her to think of whom she could call that knew Kyle's number. The only person she could think of was Noel's brother Fraser. She saw him a few times at the diner, but didn't know his number or where he lived.

Not knowing what more she could do on the Flowers front steps, Janice walked back to her car. She sat there and tried to force herself to think who might know how to reach Fraser or have Kyle's number. She wasn't happy with the answer when it came to her, but she knew it would be a start in the right direction. If anyone knew how to get a hold of someone, especially if there were a possible news story related; it was Dan.

Janice drove back to her home. She went inside, took a few pills for her headache, and looked up Dan's number in the church directory.

"Hello, deacon Dan speaking."

"Hi Dan, it's Janice."

Dan shook his head as he thought, "Why in the world would she be calling me? Whatever it is, it cannot be good." And though it was only a little after nine in the morning, he suddenly had a taste for beer.

"Yes, oh… ah, hi Janice. Is everything all right?"

A slight smile crossed Janice's face as she imagined Dan squirming on the other end of the phone. She wished it didn't feel as good as it did to have such power over him, but it felt too good to feel guilty. Well, at least not right away. "I wanted to know if you had Kyle Flowers, phone number."

"Kyle Flowers? The guy that owns Noel's Diner?"

"Yes, that's him."

"Um, well, gee, let me think. Um, I don't but I think a few guys at the barbershop might. Let me give them a jingle and call you right back."

"How about Fraser Snow? Do you have his number?"

"Hmm, I don't think I know anyone named Fraser Snow. Do I?"

Janice wanted to ask him, "How would she know whom he knew or didn't know?" But she went with, "Okay, that's fine. But if you can, please get me Kyle's number."

Dan thought about re-asking if everything was all right, but he thought it might be better if he didn't.

"I'm on it."

"Okay, thank you. I'll be at this number."

"Bye."

"Good-bye, Dan."

As Janice pressed end on her phone, she placed her hand on her head. Her head was killing her, so she thought that she would take the opportunity to lie on the couch, to see if her head would feel better. But, when her phone rang moments later, and she saw that it was Dan, she was impressed to see how fast he could get information.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Janice. I got Kyle's number from Bill, a guy at the barbershop. He didn't want to give it up at first and wanted to know if it had anything to do with the gun he sold Kyle." Dan paused briefly, "I didn't know what to say when he asked me that, so I told him that I didn't think so. Does it?"

Hearing about the gun made Janice cringe, and she started to shake as tears filled her eyes. She was praying for her head not to explode when she told Dan, "Never mind. I don't need it anymore. Thanks, Dan. Good-bye."

When she hung up, Dan thought to himself, "Man, that lady is one whacked out chick." He then put his phone back into his front pocket and walked over to the fridge to get a beer.

Three and a half miles away, Janice stood in her living room with streams of tears coming down her face. Her dream was now very vivid as she stood with her eyes shut. Not sure just how long she stood there like that, she picked up her phone and dialed 911.

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"911, what is your emergency?"

"I'd like to report a murder."

"A murder? I hear you. Is the person still in the house? Are you okay? Where did the murder take place? Is it at the location of the residence where you are placing the call?" The operator read Janice's address to her over the phone.

"No, it didn't take place here."

"Are you okay?"the operator repeated.

"Yes, I'm okay."

"Where did the murder take place?"

As Janice gave the details to the operator, the operator relayed them to the police dispatch.

Later that day when Sgt. Denny asked Janice how she knew that there was a murder at the Flowers residence, "I just knew" didn't sit well with him. However, the evidence was quite clear cut. There were no signs of breaking and entry. There was only one set of fingerprints on the gun. And there was gunpowder residue on the second victim's hand. It was a clear murder-suicide. But the question how Janice knew would drive Denny to investigate her involvement.

Later, when Janice found out that he was investigating her, she wasn't surprised, but she wasn't worried because she knew that she had nothing to hide. However, it was unnerving to think that she was being investigated for her friend's murder. This led Janice to the decision that it was time for a change of scenery.

After Noel's funeral, Janice told herself that

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she needed a break from Wisconsin, and decided it was time to visit her relatives in California. She Facetimed with each of her children and told them that she was going to go on a long vacation. Her youngest son, Jared, told her that he would look after her house while she was away.

So now, with bags packed she had one stop to make before she headed her car west. Janice was about to visit a friend of a friend in the state prison.

And though she never visited Steve before, he knew of Janice from the time he spent talking to his friend Noel. His response to the news of their friend's death gave Janice hope for his soul and was glad that she was able to do this for Noel. She knew that Noel would want Steve to know why her visits would come no more.

Leaving the prison, she pulled into the first gas station she came across. She filled her tank and went inside to get a few bottles of water and to refill her headache medicine bottle that had been empty for far too long now.

Janice walked up and down the aisles looking for the pain pills, and anything that might be good to snack on as she drove. A bag of pork rinds caught her eye. She said aloud, "Hmm, I haven't had these in years," as she tried to take the bag off the hook. But it got caught at the end of the hook, and it fell to the ground. When she picked it up, she stood up just in time to get whacked on the back of her head from a woman's purse.

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"Oh, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" asked the woman holding the purse.

Janice told her yes, she was fine. "It barely hit me. An inch to the left and it would probably have missed me entirely."

"Yes, almost, but not quite," said the woman as she stuck out her hand, "I'm Sabrina."

Janice's pause made Sabrina think that the question was forming in Janice's head and was bracing herself for the question how she got her name, but what Sabrina didn't know was, Janice was thinking of a moment of déjà vu.

She took Sabrina's hand and introduced herself, "I'm Janice." And then she asked Sabrina, "Did you ever have a feeling of déjà vu?"

Sabrina laughed, "With the name Sabrina? Sure, all the time."

Janice was unaware what Sabrina meant at first, "Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess you might get a lot of people asking you about your name. But trust me, I know all about names, strange, unusual, or otherwise." Then quickly added, "But I'm not saying your name is strange or unusual."

The blush on Janice's face was unnecessary for Sabrina since she wasn't insulted by her comment.

"That's quite all right. I'm not offended. I'm a lot thicker skinned than that." Sabrina responded then continued, "It looks like you're gathering supplies for a road trip. Any place special?"

"California. I figure it's time for a break. I just lost my friend not too long ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. How did he or she die?"

"She was shot."

Sabrina put her hand over her mouth, "She wasn't the lady that I read about in the paper was she? The murder-suicide?"

"Yes. Her name was Noel. So you read about it?"

"Yeah, we live in an area that crimes like this are unheard of. But now we've had two murders in the past couple of years."

"Yes, exactly. And thus, the reason for my road trip. I need to get away."

Sabrina extended her hand again and told Janice that she would be praying for her.

Janice took her hand and said, "Thank you, Sabrina. I would certainly appreciate that."

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Kyle's Hearing

"… For the sake of the accused, from this point forward the witnesses for this court hearing shall be called by their earthly names, Noel and Dylan Flowers, as well as the accused will be called by his earthly name, Kyle Flowers."

Kyle was still trying to make sense of what was going on. Just moments before, the last earthly memory he had of his wife was her lying motionless on their bedroom floor, right before the last sound that he heard on earth (click) and now she was sitting there as a witness to a court hearing; his court hearing? With their son?

"What? How can this be? How can he," (pointing at Dylan) "be a witness to a court hearing in, what is this place? Heaven? I understand her." (pointing to Noel) "She was always an overachieving Bible Thumper, but our son? Dylan? No way! He scoffed at religion as much as I did; maybe even more than I did."

Slam!

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"Silence."

Judge Moses addressed Kyle's questions, "We will get to that soon enough. For now, one more outburst like that from you and I will have a guard put the hush plate over your mouth. Believe me son; you do not want that to happen. So I suggest that you hold your comments until you are spoken to. Do I make myself clear?"

The thoughts were flying through Kyle's head so rapidly, "Hush plate? Dylan? If Heaven is true, Hell is too?" that he forgot to answer the judge.

"I said, do you understand?"

Slam!

"Answer the judge when you are spoken to."

"Yes. " Kyle, not wanting another blow quickly added, "Your honor."

"Very well. You made a wise choice; probably, the first and last one of your life." Judge Moses picked up a piece of paper and continued, "During this hearing, we will see evidence from the life of Princess Noel." Then Moses continued with an excited grin, "And we have evidence from a very exciting divine appointment between King Jesus ["Jesus, Jesus, Jesus…"] and Prince Dylan. Oh, I think the court will especially enjoy this piece of evidence of our Wonderful and Matchless King as he extends grace, beyond grace, to win over our newest member of the kingdom. But first, I will

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read a beautiful prayer from Princess Noel, for her husband, the accused."

Following the prayer, the hologram kicked into action as it showed scenes of Noel and Kyle's life together. And like every court hearing before Kyle's, as each scene ended, they were followed by discussion between Moses and the witness.

This continued for a long time as Moses would write something, read something, and show holograms from a lifetime of memories until the final click of the gun in the accused hands. With this last scene, Kyle felt every eye of every person or thing for that matter; heavily on him. His anger and confusion stirred inside. Kyle felt angry and betrayed, knowing that their son should be found guilty of unbelief by Jesus, just as he was found to be guilty. But instead, there he sat, wagging his head at Kyle. "I'm his father Kyle thought, how dare he sit there and judge me."

Kyle was happy that the holograms depicting the events of his and Noel's life together finally came to an end. He was dying to find out how Dylan was here as a witness and had not been found guilty by Jesus like he was. So now, whatever this divine appointment was, that the judge promised would reveal why Dylan was now called a prince, was about to be begin.

"As promised, the court will now be shown how our young brother transformed from sinner to prince," Moses said joyfully.

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The hologram started to play; it was the scene of Dylan's car, the last place where he was seen alive. In earthly time, the time of this scene would have been less than a human blink of an eye. But in Heaven, where time is always, now, and limitless, the scene lasted for what would have been over an hour in human time.

"What? Who are you? Where did you come from? Why are you here? How did you get into this car?" came a rushing barrage of questions from Dylan.

"Easy my son. Time for you has come, and you must listen to me very carefully. This will be your final chance to give your life to me. My name is Jesus."

["Jesus, Jesus, Jesus…"]

Jesus went on to explain that before the foundation of the earth, he foresaw this moment in time. He told Dylan that he created all things; including, and especially, people. He told Dylan that he made man in his image and allowed them free will.

And for the next earthly hour, Jesus walked Dylan through history. History as God, and God alone had made it. He explained how man turned their back on God, about the flood, the deliverance of his people from Pharaoh, and how he was sent to earth to walk as a human, so that he could die on the cross for sins that he did not commit. Jesus explained to Dylan that he did this so that all who would come to him, would inherit the Kingdom of Heaven; including Dylan.

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Jesus led Dylan through his lineage all the way to his mother and father; and lastly to him. As Jesus talked, he told Dylan, this person believed, and this one did not. This one did evil in the sight of the Lord; this one walked with the Lord.

During the whole time that Jesus spoke, Dylan sat there amazed that God was real and that his life was about to come to its end because of the angry man standing outside his door with a gun in his hand. If Dylan were capable of taking his eyes off Jesus, he would have seen that earth time had seemed to pause. And Steve would be standing perfectly still. Without a single hair blowing in the wind.

But he wasn't able to take his eyes off of Christ and was only able to sit still listening to the gentle voice of God, the very same God that he, his dad, and his friends mocked their entire life.

After what seemed to be a very long time, Jesus finished speaking.

Dylan was so overwhelmed and filled with questions that he didn't know where to begin. "Why, why… why me?"

"Why not you, son?"

"But, I've mocked you and made fun of my mother because of you. Why would you love someone like me? And why this?" (pointing to Steve, as he was now able to look away from his Creator) "Why all of this?"

"Because of love Dylan. Because of prayer. Your mother's and grandparents prayers have been heard,

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and I have been moved to meet with you. To give you this one last chance before it is too late." Jesus pointed to Steve, still frozen in time; this man is about to pull the trigger of his gun, and the bullet will enter your brain, killing you instantly. And when that happens, it will be too late for you to decide. You must make this last and most important decision now, before he does what he is about to do."

"But, what about him? Why don't you just stop him from killing me? Now that I've seen you, I will give myself over to you and won't mock my mother ever again. Just let me live. It will kill her when she finds out that I have been murdered."

"You speak the truth son. Your death will lead to hers, but it will also lead to his life." (Jesus pointed to Steve) "But his time, nor your mother's time has come; yet. It is yours and your time only. You must die, but your death will not be in vain. For I have seen it and so it shall be."

Dylan didn't know what more he could ask, so he reached to hold Jesus' hand—then he said his last words, "I do. I do accept your offer. I confess that you are God and to you I entrust my life into your hands. Please forgive me."

Jesus smiled and said to Dylan, "Well done. Today, you will join me in Paradise."

And as soon as he finished speaking, Jesus vanished, leaving Dylan in his car as he was about to die; alone. But he wouldn't be alone for long.

After the sound of the gun went off, the hologram went blank.

"But…."

Slam!

Moses looked to the guard and said, "Let him speak."

"But… but that's not fair. Jesus broke the rules. He changed, and if he changed, he cannot be God because God cannot change. Just ask my wife. Go ahead. Ask her."

"Oh, but nothing. It is fair. And he did not change. He broke no rule by meeting with Prince Dylan outside of earthly time. And, Princess Noel is no longer your wife. You see Kyle, God, this place," (Moses' hands pointed in several directions) "is outside of time. Time is forever here. So, as it is for all people, it is the same for Prince Dylan. His birth, life, conversion, and death took years on earth, but here in Heaven, where there is no time, it was all in one moment. And in that one moment, King Jesus ["Jesus, Jesus…"] in His wonderful and matchless grace and mercy met with your earthly son. And at that moment, Dylan chose to give over his life to his Redeemer. You, on the other hand, did not."

"What!? Okay. Fine! Fine, time, no time, it doesn't matter. Dylan got special treatment. Why didn't I?" demanded Kyle.

Moses responded, "Who is to say that you wouldn't have received the same, *special* treatment?

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You gave up on life long ago. And when you chose to end the life of Princess Noel, and your own life, by the most cowardly act humanly possible, you gave up that right to special treatment. You see Kyle, when people take matters into their own hands; they leave no room for God to work. Thus, your cowardly plan to be reunited with your son failed."

Moses let this sink in for a moment, and then continued, "We will now continue to the sentencing portion of today's hearing." Moses picked up, *The Book of Names*, opened it, read it and placed it back down on his desk. "The name Kyle Flowers, is not written in the book." Moses then nodded to the guard and Kyle was *gently* pushed to his knees. As Moses told Kyle that it was now his turn to confess to the court, what everyone in attendance was waiting to hear, the words came rushing into his mind from a memory of a church service that he attended one Easter morning; many years ago.

"Put away your cell phone. The preacher is talking. Show some respect."

Dylan's initial response was, "*Whatevs* dad." But when he saw that his dad had his phone out playing a game, he started to protest. "What? You hypocrite."

Kyle tried to convince his son that he was listening, "Shhh. Keep it down. I'm trying to learn something here." But he couldn't keep a straight face and started a muffled giggle. But it was loud

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enough for Noel to hear, which explained her look of disappointment.

"See that? Now you got me in trouble with your mom."

"Good."

"Shh."

"You shhh,"

This exchange between father and son was followed by a fist bump and another giggle, but it was cut short when the person behind them cleared their throat. Obediently, Kyle and Dylan put away their phones so they wouldn't cause a scene and be a further embarrassment to Noel. And so, looking up for the first time during the service, Kyle heard his first words of the pastor's message.

"So, please hear me, church. God will not be mocked. His word is true. His promises are too. Each and every one of us will kneel and will confess that he is Lord. We will either do this voluntarily on earth, as we call him our Lord and our Savior or we will do this under far less favorable circumstances in Heaven. But believe me, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord."

And so, kneeling with his head low, Kyle said the words, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

Moses, satisfied with Kyle's confession, looked again to the guards and said, "This hearing is now over. Take the accused to where justice will be served."

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With that said, Moses made his way down the steps to greet his brother and sister, and newest members of Christ's Kingdom. Afterward, they walked to the door that led out from the courtroom. And once the three stepped through the doorway; the door closed.

The guards then took Kyle to another door; the door of his destiny. When the guard opened the door, the sounds of screaming and crying could be heard; briefly. But these sounds ceased as soon as the guard shut the door, with Kyle unsafely on the other side.

It was now time for Kyle's second court appearance.

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Sabrina's Witness

SABRINA LEFT THE GAS STATION where she met Janice and drove toward her home. After passing the mall, she was tempted to go shopping for boots, but she then remembered that she was behind in her grading. Her students were expecting their essays back so that they could get their final rewrites turned in by the end of the semester.

Successfully resisting the temptation to buy boots, Sabrina was happy with herself. But, when she was one block away from her apartment, a display window with a mannequin wearing boots caught her eye. She struggled with herself again. She wanted the boots in a bad way, but she knew that it would only mean that she would be up much later that evening, in order to finish her grading. So, she pressed on as she thought, "Next time boots; next time. I'll be coming for you soon, so you better be on the lookout."

A short time later, Sabrina swung her car into her

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parking space in front of her apartment building, got out, and walked to the front entrance.

As she walked up to the building, she barely missed stepping on a skateboard that the boy in apartment C was always leaving on the front steps. She thought, "Another inch and I would have gone flying down the sidewalk. Wouldn't that be a sight?" She pointed to the skateboard and said, "Almost, but not quite." This made her think of the lady she met at the gas station. So, she prayed for Janice's safety, and that she would have peace while she mourned the loss of her friend, Noel.

Sabrina absently picked up the skateboard and set it to the side. She dug out her mailbox key, and took the pile of bills and advertisements from her mailbox up the stairs.

After she entered her apartment, she set her purse on the table and hung the keys on the hook. Then she walked over to the kitchen and dumped most of the pile into the trash can. However, after doing this, she frowned. Throwing the mail into the garbage can, made her think of one of her students' reports on recycling; she smiled and dug out the mail from the trash. She wiped off the coffee grounds, and set the pile aside to throw into the recycling bin later.

Once again, she thought about her encounter with Janice, as she thought to herself, "I wonder why I always feel the need to defend my name to total strangers? Janice seemed nice. I hardly doubt she would care that I was named after a teenage witch

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from a television sitcom. Why am I always going there? I didn't name myself. My name was given to me by my pagan parents that had no clue that one day their little daughter would come to know the Lord."

Sabrina stopped her pity party long enough to remember what she needed to accomplish before dinner. She loved her students, and they loved her. They didn't judge her by her name. Really, that is all that should matter. Well, that and one day meeting Mr. Wonderful.

How in the world she was going to pull off finding a good Christian man to date her with a pagan name like Sabrina, was beyond her, but she promised herself that she would leave that up to God. For now, she just wanted to be content being, Sabrina Hanson, the English teacher at the community college.

Trying to get motivated, Sabrina thought, I better get back to grading those essays.

Sabrina grabbed her bag and set it next to her old comfy chair. She put on her reading glasses and pulled out the next essay to grade.

Essay after essay she read. And as she did, she would laugh or frown, and write comments. Doing so, she forgot all about her loneliness and boot shopping. Then, she grabbed another essay and read its title, *The Worst Winter Ever*. She enjoyed having the guy that wrote the essay in her classroom and would sometimes wonder if he was a Christian. She guessed that he was because he was always very

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polite and friendly toward her and the others in her class.

She began reading his essay.

The Worst Winter Ever

The time was 10:10 in the morning. I know this because amazingly enough I am wearing a watch; something I rarely do. And, unfortunately for me, it will turn out to be something that I will later regret.

My mom, sister, and I drove to Rhinelander, a town about twenty-two miles from our home in Eagle River, Wisconsin. The unseasonable weather we experienced made for a perfect time to do some last minute Christmas shopping.

"There is that word again," thought Sabrina. "Shopping. I must… buy… boots… No; no boots. Focus. Focus, Sabrina, focus."

The days prior were true to the north-woods pattern of winter, cold, lots of snow, and more cold. As we shopped, a jet heading southbound flew over our heads, and as it did, the three of us looked up toward the sky. My sister said, "There goes the 10 AM flight to Milwaukee." Remembering that I was wearing a watch, I double-checked the time and made the correction that it was the

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10:10 A.M. flight to Milwaukee. My mom and sister both laughed and said something about me being contentious.

After shopping, we had lunch then headed back home. When we arrived, my dad came to the door to tell me that I had an urgent phone call. I ran inside to take the call leaving my sister, my mom, and the packages behind. After we hung up, I turned toward my family who had over-heard most of my conversation. They stood patiently and filled with compassion, as I relayed to them the shocking news that I had just received.

I shared with them that at 10:10 AM, (my mom and sister realizing the significance in the time, looked at one another with disbelief) one of my best friends, Dan, was driving his mother to Rhinelander for the same reason we went. However, as he drove down the same stretch of road about an hour after we did, Dan's van hit a patch of ice, spun out of control, and came to a crashing halt into a tree. His mom, wearing her seat belt received only a few cuts from the glass of the broken windshield, that her son just flew through; at 10:10 AM. Dan struck his head on the tree, killing him instantly. It was the last day that I would wear a watch for a long time.

Sabrina made a mental note to stay away from clocks that read, 10:10. She shook her head slowly in disbelief and then continued to read.

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As Christmas came and went, and the Super Bowl was fast approaching, my father and I drew close. Knowing that I just lost one of my best friends, my father tried valiantly to cheer me up. Each week we would get the newspaper to fill out the brackets for that week's round of the playoffs. As it turned out, one week he would pick more winners, and then I would the next. This was an enjoyable time of my life as I truly appreciated the camaraderie with my father. Each passing day made the loss of my friend a little easier, that is, until two weeks later.

On January 16, 1983, a dreadful winter was about to get worse.

Sabrina commented on the paper, "*Nice work with all of the precise dates, times, and detail. Great work using strong imagery.*"

But then, her thoughts trailed off as she wondered what was about to happen to make a bad winter, worse.

The morning of January 16, was extremely cold but warmer than it previously had been. So, the three of us, my mom, dad, and I agreed it would be a good day to stack wood in the basement for our wood-burning stove.

The biggest drawback of having the stove was the hard work needed to keep it operational. I didn't mind the work; I was young and in excellent shape and though

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my mom was in her early sixties, she was in good health and quite capable of the necessary labor. However, for my father it was tremendously hard work for his weak heart. Therefore, every time we would stack the wood into our basement, my mom and I would take the harder of the two jobs outside while we passed my father the wood through the basement window. We always took our time, allowing my father to take as many breaks as needed.

Sabrina wrote more comments on the paper. *"Again, I love the imagery. Nice work keeping the reader engaged."*

And yet, once again, after she wrote her comments, her thoughts trailed off as she could see where the story was headed.

Afterward, on this particular bringing-in-the-wood-day, my mom and I joined my father inside for lunch. During lunch, we got out the newspaper to pick our playoff hopefuls for the week. Later, we spent time checking out one of my cool presents that I received for Christmas; a portable cassette player. For me, it was good-bye 8-track. First we listened to one of my favorite songs, and then we played one of his. I guess for him, it was good-bye phonograph.

When the time came for me to leave for work, I got in my 1970, VW Beetle, looked back over my shoulder, and waved to my parents as I took off for my half-hour drive

to work. Although I did not know it at the time, that quick glance over my shoulder would be the last time that I would see my father alive.

Sabrina couldn't take it anymore; she set the paper aside and wiped her eyes. Yikes, this is too distressing to think about. She wondered how her student came up with such a sad story and hoped it was fictional.

Deciding that she had too much thought of death for the time being, Sabrina started to make a mental list of what she would need from the store for dinner: "Bread, carrots, creamer, boots…, no, no boots. Not today, anyway. Well, maybe. No, I don't need them," she thought. "Well, who actually *needs* boots?"

After her trip to the store, Sabrina made dinner and set the table for one. "Always for one," she thought. She looked up to her ceiling and prayed, "Please Lord, why can't I meet someone, so that I don't always have to be so lonely." After saying amen, she smiled as she thought about her students, but I'm not alone, I have them.

Most days Sabrina thought of her students as her children, even though she was sure that the two men that sat in the front row, one of which was the author of the sad essay that she was reading earlier, was older than her.

As she had done many times before, she again tried to convince herself that they were all the company she needed. It was Jesus, her students,

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some members of her church, and that little terror of a neighbor in apartment C, that mattered most in her life.

"Speaking of skateboard kid," she thought, "I wonder why the skateboard wasn't on the steps this evening?" She didn't recall seeing it on the side of the building or by the door either. She wondered if he was out riding. This made her concerned for his safety, so she said a prayer for him.

Glancing back at the stack of essays, she remembered why she quit grading them earlier, but wanting to or not, she went back to read more of the students good, but depressing story.

> Working at the nursing home was a job that I enjoyed. It was a place where I could work with one of my two sisters, (the one who is a nurse) and at the same time, I could enjoy the company of some of the residents who were like grandparents to me. I grew up with two of six siblings and both parents, but I never knew my grandparents. Therefore, I enjoyed the time that I had with the residents. However, depression set in following my dad's death, making it extremely difficult for me to continue to work at the nursing home. Therefore, I quit shortly afterward.
>
> On the evening of January 16, I got home at the normal time. And as I did each night, I took the plate of food my mom left for me from that night's dinner and put it into the microwave. As I ate the leftovers, I turned on the television to watch the weather report so that I would

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know how much snow we were expecting. Knowing that the steps would need shoveling, a chore that my father would do if I did not get out of bed early enough, I wanted to be prepared for just how much shoveling they would require.

When I finished my late night snack, I put my plate in the sink, turned off the television, and headed for bed. My mom, always worried, and always concerned for her late arriving son was still awake and wished me "good-night" as I walked past my parent's room. It occurred to me later, that my father must have been lying awake too, as he waited for me to come home. He was most likely concerned for me driving my older car on the unplowed streets. Who knows, maybe that stress, added to the strain on his heart from the previous wood chore, was too much for his heart to handle.

Once again, tears started to form in the corner of Sabrina's eyes. She wiped them away with a tissue and continued reading the essay.

I was in bed for less than a half hour, well before my mind would shut down and allowing me to sleep, when my mom came into my room to tell me something that would play over and over in my head for years to come. All she said was; my dad was gone. I asked her, "Where did he go?" In total shock and sadness for the loss of her

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spouse of more than forty-five years, she responded, "He is gone. He is dead."

Sabrina thought, "Oh, there's that word again." She prayed silently, "Lord, I pray for Janice as she must be very sad to lose a friend in such a tragic way. And I pray for Noel's family if she left any behind. I pray that if they do not know you, that you would use this time of loss and bring them new life. If they are believers, I ask that you comfort them with a peace that is beyond all understanding. In Jesus name."Then she said aloud, "Amen."

Sabrina looked back down at the essay and hoped beyond hope for a happy ending, but she was sure that it wouldn't come. She was right.

I ran into my parent's room, turned on the light, and stood there looking at my dad's lifeless body. I just stood there trying to take in what had happened as my mom called my sister to tell her the unthinkable news.

Since my father's death, two things make me think of him most. Every time it snows enough that I have to shovel the front porch, reminds me of how I had to shovel the porch later that night so that the undertaker could wheel out my dad on his gurney. The other thing that reminds me of him is when I am trying to pick the winning team of an upcoming football game. Faithfully each year, I watch the Super Bowl knowing that it was something my dad did not get a chance to do that one last time.

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Setting down the essay, the tears that ran down Sabrina's face were in full force. She wiped her eyes for several minutes, and wondered one more time, where did he come up with this story? It cannot be true, can it? How terribly sad. Sabrina decided to give it an A. Besides being well written, it was too sad of a story to give it any other grade. This student of hers quite obviously needed something to cheer him up.

Sabrina always told herself that she would never date one of her students, but after thinking about giving the author of this little doozy of an essay a hug when she saw him, she turned her attention back to her loneliness. "Please Lord, don't let me die alone."

Three days later, two things happened. One, Sabrina's prayer was answered; she got a companion. And the second, she learned that she needed to be more precise in her prayers. The Lord works in mysterious ways, and oh, does he have a sense of humor she would think to herself later that evening.

Early that morning, after another battle to resist boot shopping, Sabrina decided it would be a better use of her time if she went to her office at school versus staying at home where she would be left to her temptations to clean or work on one of her crafts, and the ever present desire to go shopping.

"Lord, I need strength," Sabrina prayed aloud as she drove to her school. The Lord answered her

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prayer as he gave Sabrina the ability to deny her desire to go shopping. Besides, and though Sabrina didn't know it at the time, the Lord had a divine appointment for her. She was about to meet someone that would challenge, change, and shape the way that Sabrina thought about faith. And as a result, she would become an even more committed prayer warrior than she had ever been.

The number of cars in the school parking lot surprised Sabrina, but then she remembered why she didn't like to teach weekend classes.

She grabbed her school bag and fetched her ID card to open the door to the faculty entrance. She was feeling a little sleepy and wished she would have grabbed a cup of coffee on her way to the school. So now she was left two options; the teachers' lounge, coffee or buy one from the school's cafeteria. Knowing how gut retching awful the coffee can be in the lounge, she ventured downstairs to the cafeteria.

Once she got to the basement level, Sabrina noticed a woman sitting on the floor with her head tucked into her knees that were pulled tightly to her face. At first glance, she looked older than most of the college aged students, and she appeared to be crying.

Shortly passing the crying woman, Sabrina saw a few of her students sitting at a table in the cafeteria. After she bought her coffee, and a bagel, with the intention of just stopping to say hello, she went over to talk to her students. Fifteen minutes later, the bagel was gone and so was the coffee. And though she enjoyed talking to her students, she knew that

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she was not getting the work done that she came in to do. So, she forced herself away from the group and headed back up to her office.

Only, she didn't get far because when she rounded the corner, the crying woman was still sitting in the same position. Knowing that this could end up keeping her from the work that was waiting for her in her office, Sabrina was tempted to walk past the crying woman for a second time. However, God had other plans, and somehow Sabrina knew it. She knew that if she didn't stop, she wouldn't be able to concentrate on her work as she would be wondering about the crying woman. And so wanting to or not, she stopped.

Crouching down, Sabrina asked, "Hello? Is everything all right? Well, I mean, I can see that not everything is okay, since you are crying. But I suppose what I am trying to ask, is there anything that I can do to help?"

Later that day, when Sabrina thought if she would have known what that *something* was going to turn out to be, Sabrina wondered if she would have still stopped to ask? The answer was yes; she would. And then much later, many years later in fact, Sabrina would be brought to tears as she thought about this question again. The answer was always a resounding yes.

At first, the lady continued to cry into her knees. Considering that some people just want to be left

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alone, almost gave Sabrina an exit to her detour from getting back to her work. But, just as Sabrina was readying herself to stand, the crying woman lifted her head off of her knees.

Digging into her purse, Sabrina pulled out a tissue and offered it to her, "Here you go." Then she asked again, "Is there anything I can do?"

Once the crying woman had her head up from her knees and she had wiped away the tears from her face, Sabrina could see that the woman appeared to be close in age with her.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you okay?" Sabrina thought to herself, "There I go again, asking her if she was okay. Of course, she wasn't okay. Who sits on a college basement floor crying?"

"Well, yes and no."

"Oh?"

"I'm physically okay, but my heart is broken."

"Oh… Boy trouble?"

"No."

"No? Oh. Then what is making you so sad? Why is your heart broken?"

"Well, you're right, it is a relationship problem, but it's not over a guy. Other than having a few guy friends, I don't find them very attractive. They have too much testosterone for my liking."

"Oh, I understand. Girl trouble." Sabrina smiled at the crying woman and continued talking, "Well, I don't have too much experience being in a relationship with girls, well none actually. I

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guess that I kind of like the testosterone. But still, a relationship is a relationship. Then again, so I am told because, actually, come to think of it, I'm not much of an expert with guys either."

The crying woman grinned and blew her nose into the tissue. "Thank you."

"No problem. I have tons of tissues in my purse," replied Sabrina.

"No, I mean, thank you for stopping."

Sabrina braced her hands against the wall and lowered herself down to the floor. Now, sitting alongside the crying woman with girl troubles, Sabrina quickly prayed to ask God to give her wisdom that would bring comfort and a solution to her problem.

Many years later, while Sabrina was walking on streets of gold, she met the angel that God used to direct Sabrina to her divine appointment and friend. He said to her that it was an honor watching a fellow servant doing the work of their King. The two talked at length about her obedience and how she did all of the right things so that God could orchestrate the arranged meeting.

Sabrina offered another smile, "Oh. That. Well, it was an easy decision. I simply asked myself, would I want to be left alone, crying on the floor?"

With this said, Sabrina extended her hand and introduced herself. "I'm Ms. Hanson. But being that you're just about my age, I guess we don't have to be so formal; you can call me Sabrina."

The crying woman took her hand and said, "Sandra."

"Nice to meet you, Sandy."

"Sandra," she corrected.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry. It's a horrible habit of mine. I guess because I've always wished that there were a shorter version of my name."

Sandra smiled, "I think Sabrina is a pretty name."

"Sure, if you are into witches from old sitcoms."

This brought on a fully pledged smile to Sandra's face. Something she doubted possible, 30 minutes ago.

Sabrina said to her, "Let's find a more comfortable place to talk. Not that I hold anything against hard, cold floors, but my bottom is killing me sitting here."

Standing first, Sabrina offered her hand again to Sandra to help her up. Once both women were standing, Sabrina suggested that they go to her office. And though her chairs in her office were not very comfortable, they would sure beat the cold floor, and they would have privacy.

Being that there was nothing in the handbook for faculty to talk to same sex students with the door shut, Sabrina shut her office door and sat in the chair across from Sandra.

"Would you like something to drink? I have bottled water that I keep under my desk."

"Sure, that would be nice." When Sabrina got up from her chair to get a bottle of water, Sandra continued, "And speaking of nice, you are being very kind to me. Not too many people would want to help out a crying, black, gay woman."

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"Well, thank you, but I'm not sure why they wouldn't." Then, as an afterthought, "They should. People should help one another no matter what their circumstance, color, culture, religion, party affiliation, or sexual preference."

"Well, regrettably, most people don't. People aren't willing to become involved. Most people aren't as gracious as you. And, um, perhaps you are right about all that other stuff, but I'm not sure that I agree about the sexual preference part. I don't believe people choose to be gay. I was born this way."

Sabrina didn't know how to respond to Sandra's comment, so she changed the subject entirely by asking her to tell her about her girl trouble.

Ninety minutes later, Sabrina learned many things about Sandra. The one that bothered her most was, now that she had broken up with her partner, Sandra had absolutely no place to live or spend the night. Sandra's plan to spend the night in the local 24 hour Wal-Mart, was not something Sabrina considered to be a valid option. Particularly, since Sabrina had a spare bedroom—one that she used for occasions when she had out of town guests that came to visit. And since Sabrina couldn't recall the last time she had a guest, she offered the room to Sandra.

"Are you certain? You have done so much already."

"Nonsense. Of course I am certain. You can stay with me until you find a place of your own. I know

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some staff that have real estate contacts and may be able to help you find a place."

"I don't know what to say," Sandra said, overwhelmed by the generous offer from someone that she just met.

Sabrina, smiling at Sandra, "Thank you, will suffice."

"Thank you." Sandra said, wiping away a tear.

Sabrina's smile shrunk slightly when she spotted the work on her desk. But not wanting to discourage Sandra, she walked over to her desk, swept up the three piles that were sitting there, and put them into her bag.

Watching Sabrina put the stacks of paper into her bag, Sandra asked, "Am I keeping you from your work?"

"What? No, no, don't be silly. Work is work, after all. There will always be work."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Let's get going. I'll show you to my apartment."

When Sabrina pulled up to the apartment building, she cautioned Sandra about the skateboard that was always lurking about and ready to give a ride to an unexpected rider. But then she noticed the skater boy by a group of his friends jumping off the railing at the far end of the building.

Pointing to the group of boys, "Well, I guess we are safe this time. But be warned, he likes to leave it wherever he leaves it."

"My nephew has one too, and he does the same thing. I told him many times that if his mother wasn't an officer in the Marine's, I'd pay him a whipping."

Both ladies laughed.

"What does your nephew say when you tell him that?"

"He tells me that he didn't need his mommy to kick my butt."

"Oh? I trust he is kidding when he tells you this."

"Yeah, he's a good kid; kind of like his aunt."

Sabrina smiled, and then she took Sandra up to her apartment.

"Well, here it is; home."

"It's very charming," Sandra told Sabrina. "I love that you have house plants. Too many people these days, don't have any plants in their homes. I believe they make a home more; homey."

"Thank you. I'm not exactly sure why I started collecting house plants. My mom never had any. Well, not any that were legal, I should add. Perhaps I collect plants because of the lack of living things around my home."

"No boyfriends?"

"Me? No. Like I said, I'm not too lucky in the relationship department. But, I do pray for one. I would love to find a man that I could spend the rest of my life with." Sabrina sounded like she had thought about this before.

"Well, maybe it's not a man you should be looking for. I'm just kidding. But you should have seen the look on your face." Sandra said laughing.

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"Oh, uh, yeah, it feels kind of hot." Sabrina said not knowing if she should smile or laugh.

"Oh, it's hot all right," Sandra quickly quipped back.

This became a full hardy laugh from both ladies. Sandra, thinking that it was nice to laugh once again said, "You have an incredibly nice apartment Sabrina. And someday when I am long gone and forgotten, I can see you spending many years with a nice guy."

Sabrina replied, "Hmm. Well, maybe; hopefully. That is my prayer at least."

"I believe it is a good prayer. I can see God answering a prayer like that, "responded Sandra but after she watched the look on Sabrina's face added, "What? Yes, I pray. I believe in God."

Sabrina blushed even more now, "Well, I didn't really think you did… or didn't. How long have you believed in God? Do you go to church?"

"I grew up in a Baptist family. As a child, I went to church every Sunday and then went home to have a huge ham or fried chicken dinner."

"Where do you go to church now, Sandra?"

"I don't. It's not like I have anything against God. I'm grateful for the way he made me."

Sabrina wondered if Sandra meant her personality, looks, or in what other way that she was she glad that God made her.

Not knowing that Sabrina was thinking this, Sandra supplied her answer, "I love that I'm gay."

Sabrina just nodded.

"But, not having anything against God and not

having something against the people in churches are two different things."

Sabrina asked, "What do you mean?"

"Truly? Well, I suppose that you might not know being that you are straight and have blond hair and blue eyes."

"They are green."

"Okay, green eyes. But, Sabrina, let me educate you and your green eyes what life is like for a gay black woman in church."

Sandra went on for several minutes telling Sabrina about all of the mean looks and comments that she has endured over the years attending various churches.

When she was finished, Sabrina said, "Consider me and my green eyes, educated." But then continued with, "I know that you might not be quick to believe me now, but it is not like that at my church."

"*What*? You have a gay pastor?"

"No, it's nothing like that. We are just a very loving church. We accept all people."

"All people? What does that mean specifically? People with two heads and three arms? That kind of people? Or do you mean something else?"

Sabrina was unsure how to respond to Sandra's question, but then remembered a song she used to sing while attending Sunday school as a child. "You know, it's like that children's song, something about being red and yellow, black and white. That kind of people. Everyone. We feel that since Jesus accepts everyone, why wouldn't we accept all people?"

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"Well, Sabrina, that would be a first. Maybe someday I'll take you up on that offer. But first things first. I need a place to live. And I need to get back to the school so that I can get my car and all my stuff. All my stuff, ha, all three bags."

"Well, think about it on the bright side, having only three bags will make my spare room look bigger," Sabrina said jokingly but hoping that she didn't sound too flippant.

Apparently she didn't, "Bigger. I like the sound of that."

After Sabrina had shown the rest of the apartment building to Sandra, she offered to take her to the school so that she could get her car. "I'll take you to the school now if you would like. But if you are hungry, and, by the way, I am starving, we could get lunch first. It would be my treat."

"I am hungry too, but I am not poor. It will be my treat," Sandra pushed back.

"Well, in that case, I know this really fancy place at the edge of town."

"I said that I wasn't poor, but I never said that I was rich."

"Oh, sure you are. You are rich in luck. You found me," Sabrina said smiling.

"Ah, but perhaps it is the other way round, since it is you that found me," Sandra offered.

With that, the two ladies made their way back to Sabrina's car and went to lunch. Not known as

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someone that watched the news on a regular basis, Sandra suggested Noel's Diner.

"Oh, ah, you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Noel's is closed."

"Remodeling?"

"No, it's ah, closed permanently."

"Eww, don't tell me that the health department closed them down. I wanted to try that place. Good thing that I didn't. What happened, did they find cockroaches?"

"No, nothing like that. Noel was killed by her husband. It was a murder-suicide. You didn't hear about it on the news?"

"Other than watching sports or the weather, I don't like watching the news too often. It is too depressing."

"Yeah, I guess I see your point."

"Murdered huh? Wow, that's much worse than being closed for cockroaches."

"You think?"

"Well, where else can we go? What do you suggest?"

The first place that Sabrina thought of was a little expensive, but they had nice outdoor seating. "Have you ever heard of the Moonlight Café?" asked Sabrina.

"Hmm, no, I cannot say that I have. What's it like?"

Sabrina described the menu and the outdoor seating and added that it was a little on the pricey

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side. When Sandra heard the prices, she replied, "Perfect. Let's go."

During lunch, while the two ladies got to know each other, Sabrina felt that it wasn't that urgent for Sandra to find another place.

"You know, Sandra, I was thinking; I've lived so long by myself, that it might be nice to have someone around. Maybe you don't have to try too hard to find another place to live. That is, if you want to stick around for a while; you can. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Is there no end to your kindness?" Sandra asked.

"Well, I do have some conditions. One, and I've wanted to say this ever since I became a Christian and had my own place, if you are living under my roof, you must come to church with me on Sunday's. Two, ah, well, um, two…"

Sandra laughed and said, "No problem. I know what two is. And that, or going to church will not be a problem."

"So, you will stay?" Sabrina asked excitedly.

"I will. I'll stay as long as you will have me."

The ladies spent the rest of their time at the Moonlight Café discussing rent, groceries, getting an extra key, and other living arrangements. Afterward, Sabrina took Sandra to the school to get her car and went back home.

Driving home, Sabrina had a conversation with God. She prayed, and he spoke to her heart. She was

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confused at first what this was all about. Why in the world would she befriend someone so opposite from her, and better yet, how? As she would bring up each question, God granted her peace.

"But God, what about…"

Peace

"How should I…"

Peace

"What will I…"

Peace

"What should I…"

Peace upon peace. For every question, she had peace. Sabrina felt that God was already there and had it all worked out. And before long, she felt silly to question God about her feelings of inadequacies. To top it off, when she remembered how Moses had questioned God too, she felt even sillier because she wasn't leading a people out of the hand of a ruthless, power hungry, earthly king. All she was doing was sharing what God had given her to share, to pray, and to be available. Available for what, she wasn't sure, but she told herself that if God was in it, then so was she.

Sabrina wasn't the only one that had a conversation with God. Sandra too was talking to God. Although, Sandra in contrast to Sabrina, her prayers were more like, "God, if you are there, what in the world am I getting myself into?"and "Sabrina is very pretty and single, but I don't feel attracted to her—why?" along with, "Can she be my friend, please?"

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As simple as her prayers may have been, God still heard. And if Sandra was listening, really listening, she would have heard so much more than her radio play the top forty current hits.

That Sunday, Sabrina wasn't sure if Sandra would give her a hard time about her word to go to church. So, she promised herself not to get angry and would give her another week if she didn't want to go. But to her surprise, Sandra was up, dressed, and drinking a cup of coffee.

"Morning. What time is church?"

Sabrina was pleasantly surprised, but did not want to let on, "Morning back. Do I smell coffee? Oh, and, uh, 10:00."

"Perfect. That gives us time to go for a walk."

Sabrina looked outside, "But it's raining."

"And?"

"And… we will get wet and cold."

"Not in the mall, we won't."

"The mall?"

Sandra answered, "Sure, silly. People walk the malls all the time."

"Well, yeah, old people."

"We are old," Sandra said laughing.

Sabrina responded, "Speak for yourself."

"Okay, maybe we are not old, but we can still go mall walking. I've done it before, and I wasn't the youngest one there."

Sabrina couldn't think of a good reason not to go to the mall with Sandra, and she certainly didn't

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want to shut down an invite to do something with her, when Sandra was willing to go to church. So, she told her, "Okay, give me two minutes to get on my workout pants and shoes."

She then executed an about-face and ran back toward her bedroom to change.

"Hurry up girl. Times a wasting."

The morning walks became a Sunday morning ritual for the two friends. When it was nice outside, they walked to get a cup of coffee. And, when it was cold, wet, or they just needed to see different scenery, such as boots and shoes, they went mall walking. And as customary, they would get home from their walk, have breakfast, and go to church.

For the most part, Sabrina was right; the majority of the people in her church were very friendly and accepting. And so, as Sandra let her wall's down and became more comfortable with people in the church; she got involved in outreach ministries.

It felt good to Sandra, to give. After all, her friend and roommate was a living example of someone that loved to give. She possessed kindness and a giving heart like no other person she knew. Thus, over the weeks attending the church, Sandra got more and more involved. And before long, she was in charge of two outreach ministries and was helping in three others. When Sandra wasn't at school or work, she was engaged in her ministries. And as she got more involved in the ministries, she became closer and closer to the people she served with. Only, no one

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was closer to Sandra than the one who rescued her from the college basement floor; crying.

Sandra loved and admired Sabrina, but not in a relational type of love. What Sandra felt for Sabrina was something that she could not explain. To Sandra, Sabrina was the most beautiful person that she had ever met and was thankful to be her friend—her best friend.

Sabrina felt the same toward Sandra and was drawn to her spirit. And as much as she loved Sandra as a friend, and loved that she not only lived up to her end of the bargain to attend church each Sunday, but became a serving rock-star, there was something that made Sabrina ache inside for her friend. She couldn't explain what it was. Sandra was doing all of the right stuff. She read her Bible, she talked about faith, and she served in the church, but she seemed to be doing it more out of love for people than love for God. It scared Sabrina to think this way about her friend. She didn't like the feeling that she was judging her. So, whenever these thoughts came up, she dismissed them the best way that she knew how; prayer.

Thus, Sabrina submerged herself in prayer. She read books about it. She did Bible studies on prayer. And she took several classes at both her church and other local churches in the community. She even went to a three day seminar in Milwaukee, all on prayer. As a result, Sabrina became quite the prayer warrior.

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Sandra tried to get excited about prayer too, but she found out that she would rather be doing something versus just sitting or kneeling all the time. So, being that neither of the ladies was in a relationship, their separate ministry interests were the only area that the two friends did separately during their free time.

It was a wonderful time for both. And as they did many things together, their favorite thing to do was eat. The two friends loved eating at their new favorite hangout, the Moonlight Café.

While they would sit outside eating their salads and sandwiches, they would talk. They talked about their ministries, school, family life, and the lack of having a special someone. If the two friends were ever in a competition for most sentimental, it would be a tight race.

"Did I tell you about one of my students named Donald?"

"Is that the one with the unibrow?"

Sabrina laughed, "No. That was Tyler. Donald is a black man that moved here from Nigeria. Well, he didn't actually move here. He is here to attend school to become a pastor. "

"Oh, yeah, I think you did mention him. You stated that his wife is working as a dental assistant or something alike that."

"Correct. Well, he was working on a paper after class one day last week when his left eye rolled to the back of its socket. I don't know what my facial

expression was, but I thought that I was going to either, faint, laugh, cry, or do all three."

"Yuck, what happened?"

"He didn't appear to notice right away, but when he looked up…"

"With his good eye?" asked Sandra.

Laughing, "Yes, with his good eye, he saw the look on my face, and it must have dawned on him what had happened. So he pulled up his eyelid, took his two fingers, and pinched his eyeball and rotated it back down to its normal position."

"Normal? My goodness, girl. What is normal about that? What did you do then? Did you faint?"

"No, no, I just sat at my desk looking like a deer in headlights and smiled at him."

"And?"

"And he smiled back."

"And?"

"And that was it. He acted like it didn't happen, and I didn't ask, so we finished working on his paper."

"Oh, that must have been something."

"It was something all right."

The waiter came over to see if they wanted anything and promised that their order would be out soon.

"Some more Diet Coke, please."

"Same."

When the waiter left to bring them their drinks, Sandra said, "He reminds me of that weather dude that died not too long ago. Adam something. "

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"You mean the one that called himself, Wausau's first meteorologist?"

"Yeah, that's him. Why did he call himself that anyway? He wasn't the first weatherman on TV."

"I think it had something to do with his first name being Adam."

"And?"

"Well, Adam was the first man. You know, from the Bible. Adam and Eve."

"Adam and Steve?"

"Not funny."

"Sure it is."

Not wanting to make it into a big deal, Sabrina just went along and laughed with her friend. The two ladies laughed for a bit as they sat sipping their Diet Cokes.

Then Sabrina continued, "I think the weather man was friends with one of the deacons from the church across town that runs the homeless shelter. He died a while ago. I remember hearing something about it while eating at Noel's Diner."

"The cockroach place?"

"Murder-suicide."

"Close enough."

"Um, okay…" Sabrina took a sip, then added, "If I remember correctly, I think that I recall someone telling me that the wife of the deacon that died was in charge of the weatherman's funeral."

"Oh, you're talking about Janice."

"Wait!! Her name is Janice? Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. I met her at a gift shop once. We

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talked about the stress of the holidays. Besides, I never forget a pretty face, Sabrina." Then she raised an eyebrow and smiled as she said, "She's got a pretty face, too old for me, but was still pretty and her name just kind of stuck with me. But I never had a crush on her if that is what you are thinking."

"Sandra, you should know by now that I don't judge you for your lifestyle. I think, assume, or wonder about no one that you may or may not be interested in. It is simply none of my business. Besides, you always say that it's how God made you. So who am I to convince you otherwise?"

Sandra didn't like when Sabrina said that to her, but she knew that she was the one that brought it up, so she let it go and said to her, "I know my dear friend. That's what I love most about you. And it's what baffles me most. I can truly say that if there is anything about your church that I admire most is, there are women like you that take me for who I am. Now, I cannot say that for all of the men or woman at our church, because if looks could kill… I would have been dead many times over."

Their conversation was interrupted by the waiter as he brought them their orders. "Pub burger, sweet potato fries, and tartar sauce on the side," said the waiter as he placed a plate of food in front of Sandra. Placing the other plate in front of Sabrina, "Ruben on marble, extra pickles, and Tabasco sauce."

After thanking the waiter, Sabrina prayed for their food, and then asked, "Really? I think that is

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your imagination, Sandra. I'm sure nobody is giving you the evil eye."

Sandra just nodded and smiled at her friend. This made Sabrina wonder if it was true and who might be giving such looks toward her friend. She decided to keep a closer eye out for busybodies wagging their heads and pointing fingers. If she saw anything like this going on, she was sure that, the conversation would not go well, even in church. She hoped it was Sandra's imagination, but she had her doubts.

"Well, if I ever see anyone treating my friend in any way that Jesus himself wouldn't treat you, well, I'll have some choice words for them. That's all I can say."

"Whoa, you go girl. Sabrina to my defense. It's nice to have you in my corner. I like knowing that you have my back."

Sabrina then remembered what they were talking about. "So you say that this woman's name is Janice? Wow, that's really funny. What a small world." Sabrina mused, then continued on with, "I don't believe in coincidences, but that is really strange that you know the woman I met just a few days before I met you."

Sandra shook her head in agreement and then remembered something that she had never shared with her friend. The expression on her face made Sabrina ask, "What's wrong?"

Sandra replied, "I was just thinking that strange things happen all the time. Sad things too. For

instance, remember when I worked with that foster care agency?"

"The one where you took the kids for the afternoon, kind of like a big sister program?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Well, one of the boys that I use to take to the lake to fly kites, his mother tried to commit suicide. So the court took him away and placed him in foster care and her in a psych ward."

Sabrina sighed, and then asked, "What would cause someone to do something so awful?"

"She was afraid that her son was going to die," Sandra said reflectively.

"So, she thought that killing herself was the answer? How sad."

"Well, the boy was her third child. Her husband and her other two children all died on the same day."

Sabrina asked, "Car accident?"

"No, on different years. The same day but different years. They all died from different things. Her husband was killed in a deer hunting accident. Then, two years later her daughter died of pneumonia."

Sabrina gasped, "On the same day her father died?"

"Yeah. But it gets worse. Last year, her youngest son was at a friend's home for a birthday party and somehow he and another boy got into an enclosed gazebo with a hot tub."

Sabrina knew where this was leading said, "Oh no."

"Yeah, so anyway, when the party was over, they

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discovered that two of the children were missing. And so they searched the whole house and found them in the hot tub, with the lid covered over them. The one boy, the son of the lady that tried to commit suicide, was pronounced dead on arrival. The other boy, they were able to revive, and he survived."

"Oh, my goodness, that's horrifying. And, and… it was on the same day that her husband and daughter died? That would almost be too much to bear."

"I know, right? And so when she was notified by the police, she had a major anxiety attack. So they rushed her to the hospital. Then, while, in the hospital, she broke the bathroom mirror and tried to kill herself by slitting her wrists."

"Oh, how sad. That poor boy. That would be hard enough for an adult to go through, but being a child, I can't even imagine the pain that would cause. That is truly heartbreaking."

"Yeah; yeah, it is. And so when she tried to kill herself the court placed the boy in a foster home. It was supposedly going to be only while she recovered, but she never wanted him back."

Sabrina was starting to cry, "How sad."

"I know." Recalling the story was bringing up the old emotions that Sandra went through during the time she spent with the boy, and now her friend was crying. So Sandra had to take several breaths to regain her composure. Once she had, she continued, "So the boy would often cry and ask me if he was going to die on the same day."

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Sabrina's sadness ran its course, and she was able to talk again, "That must have been horrifying. Why didn't you ever tell me about this?"

Sandra replied, "Because I was mad at God and didn't want you to know. I didn't want you to be disappointed in me."

"I'm so sorry that you lived with that. It must have taken a long time to get over it."

"Well, yes and no," Sandra, wiping the corner of her eyes. "I was in the library one afternoon when I spotted a book on the shelf called, *Why Does a Good God Allow Bad Things*? So, I picked it up and started reading it."

Sabrina with her hand over her mouth, "Oh, I saw that book under the couch cushion when I was looking for the remote one day. I thought of asking you about it, but I didn't want to pry because, well, because I figured if you were hiding it, you didn't want to talk about it."

"Spying on me?"

Sabrina's face reddened, "What? No, I wasn't, I mean I don't…"

It took a little effort, but Sandra found the ability to laugh, and replied to her friend, "Relax. I was just kidding around. Besides, I guess that I could have found a better hiding place than under the couch cushion.

Sabrina with her hand under her chin and her index finger over her lips, "Maybe you hid it there hoping that I would find it."

"Uh-oh, don't go psychoanalyzing me now."

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This time both women were able to laugh. Then Sabrina shook her head and said, "Well, that was a wonderful story. Thanks' for cheering me up. Do you want to tell me a good house burning story next?"

"Sure. When I was a child…" but before Sandra could get out another word, Sabrina held both hands over her ears and said, "Joking. I was joking."

The friends laughed again. After the heartfelt story, it felt good to laugh. But later that night, Sabrina couldn't sleep. Not because of the sad story per se, but more for the fact that her friend had to hide her feelings about God. So Sabrina did what she did best; she prayed.

"Dear God, my Father in heaven, I have always and will continue to marvel at your creation. Your majesty amazes me and leaves me breathless. I cannot imagine how I, nor anyone else could ever manage to live one day without you and your loving and forgiving ways. If you were not God, and all of those on earth, in the sea, and in the sky came to be by accident as so many people foolishly believe, then I cannot believe how utterly useless life would be.

Without you, there would be no love, for your word says, God is love. Without you, there would be no justice. Because your word says that you are a just God. Without you, there would be no peace, no hope, and no comfort.

For your word is abundantly clear, that you and you alone are the God of these things. Your power is matchless. Your goodness and long-suffering sustain

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us. Without you, we are nothing. Without you, there is no life. All that I see, all that I have, and all that I know comes from you.

All things were created by you and for you. You are in all things. And you made us in your image. And being made in your image, we are relational, because you, you are a relational God. And because you are a relational God, you allow me to have a friendship with a very special person. One whom I have learned so much about my faith and about serving others.

Therefore, my God and Savior, I cry out to you on Sandra's behalf. Please Lord, if she is not saved, save her. Let her hear your sweet, soft voice. Let her eyes be opened to you and know that for all eternity, she will be with her Creator.

Lord, I cannot imagine life in your Kingdom without her. She has such a giving and loving heart. Please, let her for once use her kindness and serving heart to serve herself. I pray that she would have her eyes opened to her needs so she may know you, not as God, any god, but The God. The Almighty, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, and Savior of the world. And I ask that you open her ears so that she may know that she, too, is part of the world, and you want her to live with you for all eternity.

If you so choose to use me, I thank you for the honor; if you have chosen someone else to lead Sandra to Christ knocking at her heart's door, then so be it, and praise Jesus!

Move her in such a way that she can see you; and you alone. Do whatever it takes to bring her to the

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point that she will see that it is only you that can save her. Not by works or good deeds, but through grace and grace alone. Let her know that you are the God that saves. And that she cannot save herself. Bring her to the point that she must trust and hope in you alone for her salvation and that you alone sustain life by your power.

All I ask is that you save her just as you have saved me. Words are not enough to express my desire for her to be saved and so these tears, Lord, I shed them for her. I cry to you not for my salvation, because I know that I belong to you, but I cry for my friend, my friend that you have given me. Save her please Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen."

The next day Sabrina would once again realize that she needed to be more specific in her prayers. Although, she would not be so proud to think she nor her prayer was the reason that caused the news of cancer that would be delivered to her friend. Yet, it still stung. It stung hard and like nothing ever before. The news that Sandra would share with her later that day would make her think of her prayer, but she knew beyond any doubt that her prayer was only the reflection of her heart for her friend to be saved; nothing more.

Sabrina fumbled in her purse as she looked for her phone; ringing. She glanced at her caller ID, "Hey, girl. How did your doctor appointment go? Were they able to find out the source of your pain?"

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Silence.

"Hello? Is something wrong with your phone? Are you driving through a tunnel?"

Silence.

"Sandra? Is everything all right?"Sabrina pressed the phone hard to her ear. Then she heard it. It wasn't exactly silence on the other end—when she listened closer, she could hear her friend; sobbing.

"Sandra!! Answer me! What's wrong!?"

"I saw the doctor."

"And?"

"And, well, they are not always correct, but she told me, that I have stage four cancer."

The phone slipped out of Sabrina's hand, and it dropped on the apartment floor. As it did, it bounced twice and then found its way into the corner of her kitchen cabinet. When it came to rest, it was in many pieces, and none of them any longer resembled a phone.

Sandra, not knowing what happened, thought the worse; she thought that Sabrina was mad at her. Or, perhaps, maybe Sabrina thought that she was joking. She redialed again; and again. And when Sabrina did not answer after the fifth try, she pulled into the parking lot of the strip mall two miles from their apartment. She put her head into her hands over her steering wheel and wept bitterly.

In the meantime, back in the apartment, Sabrina was frantic. She was crying, and crying to God. She

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was shouting, and shouting at God. She was angry, confused, and desperate to hear back from Sandra. But her phone, in tiny little pieces, just stared up at her from the floor; silent.

An hour later, when Sabrina heard the keys unlocking the apartment door, she ran over to the door, swung it wide open and pulled Sandra to herself. The two stood there, holding one another, as the floor became wet with their tears.

When they were finally able to speak, Sandra spoke first, "I thought you were mad at me."

"Mad? Why would I be mad at you?"

"I don't know. You wouldn't answer your phone so I thought that you were mad."

Sabrina pointed to the floor, "There, that is why I couldn't answer the phone." Sandra looked at the phone in tiny pieces spread all over the floor. "When you told me the news, I dropped the phone. And unlike any normal phone that would fall and bounce once or twice, my phone decided to do a somersault right into the kitchen cabinet."

"I think it's broken," Sandra said, trying to smile.

In a nervous and relieved laughter that her friend was home, Sabrina was able to get out the words, "You think?" Then she continued with, "We are going to get through this. Together; you and me."

Sandra then surprised her friend, "And God."

Sabrina held her friend by her shoulders at arms length and squeezed, "Yes! Yes, and God. Yes, yes indeed. We will fight this in God's strength, Sandra."

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It all sounded like a good plan. But the stage four cancer would turn out to be stage five cancer, if there were such a thing. Sandra was running out of time. In Heaven, the guards were given their orders and Sabrina was once again going to be alone. But, by God's great mercy and compassion, it wouldn't be for long.

On her way to visit Sandra, Sabrina stopped at the book store. She found what she was looking for, and ten minutes later she was on her way. Arriving at the hospital, Sabrina saw an older couple walking arm in arm. She couldn't help thinking that although she wouldn't trade the six years that she spent living with her friend, she still had one desire that was unmet; the desire to be married.

At the hospital, Sabrina was far from being considered a visitor. Long gone were the days that she had to stop at the visitor's desk to get a name tag. Now, the two older ladies would just wave, and smile as Sabrina walked up to the elevator door and pushed the up button.

One of the ladies, named Alice, leaned over to the other and whispered, "I wonder what her story is."

"What!?" replied Betty in a loud voice.

Not wanting to make a scene, Alice lied, "I said, it looks like it is going to rain."

Betty replied, "Oh yes, my ankle has been throbbing all morning."

Sabrina tried to suppress her laugh, but ended up snorting. Luckily for her, the elevator door opened.

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She let out two doctors and a nurse, and then stepped inside. As the door shut, she had the feeling that one of the doctors was looking over his shoulder at her. When she caught his eye, he quickly looked at the chart in his hand and kept walking. Now with the doors shut, Sabrina said aloud, "Was he checking me out?" And then she cocked her head to the side and said, "No, don't be silly, Sabrina. He probably thought that he forgot something in the elevator. Something like a patient or… or he was checking you out."

Her thoughts trailed off as the doors opened to the sound of the bell that she was now accustomed to hearing, telling her that she had arrived at the fourth floor's cancer ward.

Walking down the hall, Sabrina was thinking that some of the patients were looking familiar to her; too familiar. She rounded the corner at the end of the first hall, walked past the nurses' station, and thought, they too are starting to look familiar. Some of them would smile at her as she walked by. Sabrina would smile back then she would keep walking up three doors to room 422.

Sabrina gave a courteous knock on the slightly open door and stepped inside. "Good morning sunshine."

"Someone is in a good mood," came from a voice of the patient in bed number two. Some days, Sabrina didn't recognize her friend. She looked like, well, like a sick patient. "Well, I'm glad you're in a good mood. That makes one of us." Sandra's voice sounded labored to Sabrina.

Sabrina walked over to the side of her friend's bed, "Bad morning? How is the pain?"

"Which question do you want me to answer?"

"Ah, the first I guess."

"Well, then I'll answer the second, and you can figure out the first on your own; the pain is horrible today, just horrible. And the people around here do nothing about it."

The nurse attending the patient in the bed number one said, "I heard that Sandy," giggled, and then corrected, "Sandra."

"Oh, ha, ha, ha, I'm glad that I can amuse you."

The nurse responded, "Did someone wake up on the wrong side of the bed?" She caught Sabrina's eye and winked at her. Sabrina smiled back. And then said to her friend, "I don't know; it seems like the nurses are very friendly here."

This got two replies, one from Sandra and one from the nurse.

"Figures you would take their side," Sandra tried to sound playfully annoyed, but it came out strained and had to cough two times.

The nurse responded, "It's nice to be acknowledged for our kindness around here. Thank you."

Sandra shot back, "Don't you two have other patients you can pick on?"

To that, the nurse pulled back the curtain and gave her best surprised look of being appalled and hung her head as she said, "Okay, I know when I'm not wanted." She offered Sabrina another wink and left the room. She announced over her shoulder as

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she walked out, "I'll be back at 11 with your meds Sweetie."

"Whatever," replied Sandra then turned her attention to her friend, "Why are you so cheerful? It almost looks like you're in love."

The surprised look on Sabrina's face would have been enough ammunition for Sandra to go on to tease her friend with an onslaught of ribbings, but today she was just too tired for any of that and settled for a half raised eyebrow.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. Well, I did have a doctor check me out on the way up here."

"Was she cute?"

Sabrina wanted to get off the topic and held up the bag in her hand, "I got a little present for you."

"Cyanide? Hemlock?"

"No, none of that. You are a bad guesser. Did anyone ever tell you that? I got you a book." Sabrina opened the bag and took out the book that she bought from the bookstore, and then held it out to Sandra, "For you."

When Sandra saw the book, she didn't know if she should laugh, cry, or scoff. She chose scoff.

"Read it. Been there, done that."

"Yeah, but I haven't. So, I was thinking that I'd like to read it to you on my visits."

"Lucky me," Sandra said as she looked away from her friend and looked out the window. Then she looked back, "Where did you find that, under the couch cushion?"

This made Sabrina smile. "Oh, so you do remember the book?"

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Sandra lied, "I'm not mad at God, Sabrina. You don't have to bother."

"Oh, no one said you were mad, and it is no bother." Wanting to change the subject so that the idea of Sabrina reading the book to Sandra could sink in, she asked her friend if she remembered the first time they went to a hospital together.

"Yes, I do. In fact, I was just thinking about that this morning. I couldn't remember her name, which is unlike me because I never forget a pretty face." Sandra pointed to the drip bag, "But all these drugs they got pumped into me, is making it hard to think."

Sabrina nodded her head, indicating she understood, "It must be very frustrating. But when you are all better, this will all be behind you."

"If you say so. Well, anyway, what were we talking about?" Sandra said dizzily.

The dreamlike state that Sandra was in, reminded Sabrina of trying to tune into a weak radio station as you drove. It was almost comical how one second she was so alert and another to be so out of it. But not wanting to discourage her friend; she held back all signs of it being humorous and answered her friend's question, "The girl we took to the hospital."

"Oh yeah," Sandra said and was starting to look almost like her old self for a few seconds. Just the remembrance of this girl was enough to keep Sandra on the edge of coherency. "What was her name?"

Sabrina knew that the question was coming, but she was still not able to produce the answer, "I was just trying to think of that myself."

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"Oh. Well, I'm sure it will come to us. So anyway, she was the reason I started up the, Choose Life Ministry. That poor girl would have died if it weren't for us." Sabrina thought about correcting Sandra by telling her it was God, but she didn't want to disturb her friend and let her continue. "That doctor who botched her abortion should be hung. That man deserves to die."

This time Sabrina did cut in, "He did. He died."

"What? He's dead. Good. What did he die from? I hope someone hung him for hacking up young girls."

Sabina's response was a little too inaudible, and Sandra didn't hear her the first time, so Sabrina had to repeat it, "Cancer. He died of cancer last year."

"Oh. Well. Too bad for him."

Sabrina tucked her upper lip under her lower lip, and raised both eyebrows. This brought on a small giggle from Sandra. Then she continued, "After we found her sitting, dying, on the sidewalk like some unwanted mutt, something in me snapped. I imagine God had something to do with it. On one hand, I had so much compassion for this girl when we found out what she had been through. But on the other hand, all I could do, day and night, was to think of ways to shut that clinic down; for good."

Sabrina breathed out a huge sigh, "I'm with you on that one sis."

"I don't know if you will be for long. I'm telling you a lot of things came to mind. Some things probably came from God, others not so much. I mean,

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don't get me wrong, I thought your approach was valid. I liked how you took this to prayer. You were very faithful in your prayers for this. But Sabrina, I wanted something done, and I wanted it done right away. And the things I thought of, they would have done the trick. Setting the building on fire, shooting the SOB, bombs…"

The thought of her friend doing any of those things that Sandra just mentioned, made Sabrina shrink back a little bit. And she didn't want her to go down that path right now, by thinking about such awful things. So she tried to get her from thinking about the negatives and mentioned the positive results from her labor. "You were really instrumental in God's provisions, Sandra. God used you to save over forty plus lives. More than 30% of the girls that you met with ended up changing their minds and didn't go through with the abortion. And the girls that would not listen to you, about one quarter of them started coming to our church afterward."

"Well, you know what they say about statistics. 27%, no wait, 56% of all statistics are made up on the spot."

Sabrina chuckled briefly, but then pressed on, "Well, the numbers aren't what's important, Sandra. God used you in a significant and very special way for his Kingdom."

"Yeah, I guess."

"You guess nothing. You made a difference in many lives and put a stop to several abortions

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because you care so much about others. You are a genuine saint, Sandra."

This last comment by Sabrin had two results: One, Sandra just side stepped her friend's compliment by deflecting it back to her, "Well, I was just trying to walk in your footsteps." And the other thing the comment did, it made Sabrina wonder if her friend was truly considered a saint. Sabrina knew from reading the Bible that only those that have eternal life in Christ are called saints.

And though Sandra did many saintlike things, and lived a self-sacrificing life, Sabrina all too often wondered if all of the good deeds that her friend did were to even the scale of good and bad in her life. If that were the case, and all of the good that Sandra did in her life were part of a works system, then she missed the point completely as to how one is saved. To Sabrina, she thought that her pastor made it ridiculously clear what you must do to gain eternal salvation, but now, ever since she knew Sandra, Sabrina wasn't sure if you could ever beat that dead horse enough. Some people just won't ever get it.

But Sabrina knew one thing for sure, it could never be said of her that she did not try to get Sandra to understand the difference between good people and sinners.

People that knew that they were sinners and wanted salvation knew they needed Jesus to do it. Good people that knew they sinned, trusted in their own goodness. More than a few times Sabrina

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would tell Sandra, good will never be good enough. To all of this, Sandra would reply, "Yes, yes, I know, good people go to hell every day."

This reminded Sabrina of the essay that she read from one of her students, a couple of days before she met Sandra. She decided to tell her about how sudden death can be, and how final it is, unless you belonged to Christ.

"Sandra, did I ever tell you about the essay that one of my students wrote about his friend that died?"

Sandra was starting to fade a little, "Umm, not sure. Does it have a happy ending?"

"Well, no."

"Oh."

"All right, I'll spare you the details of the essay. But the point I wanted to make by telling you about the essay is, death comes quick sometimes. It can be very unexpected at times."

"Is this supposed to cheer me up?"

"I'm not trying to scare you or make you depressed. If it is, I'm sorry, but I'm also not. I just want to know that I will see you in Heaven."

"Sabrina, I'm going to Heaven. There is no doubt in my mind. I will be there. And by the looks of things, I'll be waiting for you."

Sabrina felt bad for upsetting her friend and didn't press the issue any further.

Over the next three weeks, four things happened. One, Sabrina got the shock of her life sitting in the

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hospital cafeteria, when a man approached her and asked if she would like some company. She quickly turned her head behind her to see whom the doctor was talking to but when there was no one there, she looked up and saw the doctor from the elevator, and he was asking her a question. At first, Sabrina didn't know what to say, so when she said nothing, the doctor took it as an invitation to sit down.

He greeted her, "Hi, I'm Dr. Stevens. I've seen you around for the past few weeks and I wanted to get to know you. I didn't see a ring on your finger. Are you, um, married?"

"Married? No. You?" Sabrina felt her face starting to get warm.

"Me? No." followed by a chuckle, "Then, since neither of us is married; I guess it is okay for me to sit here?" It came out more like a statement than a question.

"No. I mean, yes. You can sit here."

"Good. Otherwise, it would be a little awkward having to leave. So tell me…"

"Sabrina."

This got a raised eyebrow and a smile from the doctor. Sabrina didn't know what it was about and was going to ask, but the doctor spoke up before she could, "Sabrina, as in the teenage witch?"

Sabrina was a little taken aback from this and didn't know how to respond as she thought to herself, "Here I sit, talking to the cute doctor that I suspected was checking me out, and he is now making a joke about my name? Can this really be

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happening to me? Was he really kidding me about my name?"

Perhaps sensing this, the doctor spoke up immediately, "Oh, let me tell you my first name before I offend you any further. My name is Dr. *Darren* Stevens. I guess it must be fate and only fitting that I would be attracted to someone named after a witch. "

The look on Sabrina's face was priceless.

Another thing that happened during this time was, Sabrina read to her friend from the book that helped her understand why God allows pain and suffering. And as she did, her friend loosened up her anger toward God, but she still would not forgive him. Sandra felt too abandoned by God to forgive him for her sickness.

The book helped, but sadly; she refused to reconcile with the God that knew of no other gods, the one that had the power to heal and the power to cause illness. But despite her frustration with God, she still prayed and hoped that she had done enough good deeds to get into Heaven so that she could get rid of this broken and diseased body to get a new one like she read about in her Bible.

The third thing that took place, Sabrina met Viper. Standing in the hospital gift shop, waiting for her cup of coffee, Sabrina's eye caught a man wearing an inappropriate T-shirt, or so she thought. It read; 'Jesus knows Diddly.' Appalled by the T-shirt,

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Sabrina wanted to go over and ask the young man why he would wear such a shirt. But as the woman behind the counter gave Sabrina her coffee, the young man wearing the shirt turned to pick up a newspaper from the rack, it was then that Sabrina felt foolish for her anger toward him. As she read the back of his shirt that stated, 'and every hair on Diddly's head', Sabrina grinned.

And now, more determined than ever, she went over to have a talk with him, "Excuse me. But, I need to ask, where in the world did you find your T-shirt?"

Startled, the young man turned around a little too fast, making his newspaper collide with her coffee. The coffee splattered pattern resembled a question mark on Sabina's blouse.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry," said Viper.

"Nope. It's totally my fault. But now, by the looks of my blouse, I need to know more than ever where I can get a shirt like yours."

The grimace on Vipers face was comical to Sabrina, "Just kidding. I hear that coffee stained shirts are all the rage these days." She extended her hand, "Hi, I'm Sabrina."

He took her hand, "Viper."

At first Sabrina didn't know what that meant, but then she realized that she had just met someone with a stranger name than hers.

He spoke again, "I'm so sorry. If I would have turned a little slower, this wouldn't have happened."

"Sure, but then I wouldn't have a story to tell. I guess that I need to learn to not startle people.

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And, to watch my proximity when standing behind others. An inch to the left and the newspaper would have missed the coffee entirely."

Viper responded, "Yeah, almost but not quite."

The two talked for a moment longer. Then he went his way, and she went hers; both with shirts that would catch people's eyes for the rest of their time in the hospital that day.

And in the end, the last thing that happened, little by little Sandra gave into her illness and was fast approaching her new body and would wait in Heaven for her friend to join her; or so she believed.

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Sandra's Hearing

JUDGE MOSES LOOKED TO THE guard and told him, that there was no need for Sandra's chains. The guard replied, "Procedures. But, if you wish me to take them off, so it shall be done."

"Yes, I want them off please. Thank you."

The guard removed the chains and set them aside. Then, Moses set Sandra's file on his desk and peered down at her from high atop his desk in the courtroom and asked, "Do you know why you are here, Sandra?"

Sandra answered, "It is because I am gay."

"No. No, it is not because you are gay. It has nothing to do with your being gay or not being gay. It's not because of the number of sins you committed nor is it the number of sins you did not commit. It is not because you did not serve enough, served too much, or somewhere in between.

It's not because you went to church too many times or too few times. You were rewarded for the good services you've done on earth. But those good

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services and the rewards that you received for doing them are only good while on earth. They are earthly things and were rewarded earthly rewards.

This, is Heaven. And in Heaven there is only one way to enter. You know his name. You read his book. You did everything right, all except for one thing. You did not give him your heart. And that is the only way to enter Heaven. Heaven is not for those who do good deeds, Sandra.

Heaven is full of people who have sinned because all have sinned. Heaven is for those who give their life to Christ. You heard this from your friend. You heard this from your pastor. You read it for yourself in your Bible. Still, you are here before me today for your hearing and to be sentenced. King Jesus has delivered to me your case. He has found you guilty of unbelief, Sandra. And because of your unbelief, you will be sentenced in accordance with the law."

Moses stopped talking for a moment, so that Sandra could take in the seriousness of her offense.

As he picked up her file, he looked at Sandra and spoke, "Cases like yours, Sandra, are the hardest of all. You knew what it took, but you never did it. Why? Why did you spend your entire life serving the needs of others, while giving up your own desires to help those in need?

Now, all of the good things that you have done means absolutely nothing here in regards to salvation. And you knew that. Yet, here you are standing before me today.

It is a sorry day for us in Heaven. It is far easier

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for me as a judge, to administer Christ's sentence of eternal punishment in Hell for someone that did not go to church and even hated God, than it is for me to send someone like you who went to church faithfully. It baffles me why someone who gave as much as you gave, and went without as much as you went without, just to end up here.

But because of the stubbornness of your heart, and because you would not give yourself to the Lord, you stand before us today, awaiting your sentencing. At the end of each hearing and sentencing, Sandra, I turn over the accused to the guard. And, it is at that time, that they take the accused to the sentencing room. They are only following orders, and for the most part, they do this mechanically and without emotion.

But today, the guard that will take you to the sentencing room was the very same angel that watched over your life. He is burdened with this today; as all of us are. Not only did he keep you from harm, he helped inspire you to go to church and to read your Bible. He helped you listen to God's Spirit, and although he was obedient, he was saddened to find out that today was your sentencing date. Because Sandra, once you stand here before the judge of this courtroom, it is too late. Jesus has already judged you, and you must soon depart from Heaven for eternity."

Moses paused again momentarily; then he continued, "The very last thing before I send you over to the guard for your sentencing is to look in

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the book of names. It is called, *The Book of Life*. You learned about it in your Bible, Sandra. And as I read it, I am confident of one thing, your name will not be written in it. When I look for it, I will not find it."

Moses stopped and looked deep into Sandra's eyes, "And so I repeat. It is not because of your sins. For all have sinned and fall short. It is not because of a lack of good deeds. Because you have done more good deeds than many Christians who enter the gates of Heaven to live for eternity. And it is not because you're gay. It is only because you refused to call upon him and him alone that could save your soul, the author of faith. And it is this faith, the faith that you lacked, the very same faith that would've saved you from Hell. If, and only if, you would have heeded to the warnings, the many warnings that were given to you. But now that you stand before me in Heaven, it is too late."

Moses again picked up Sandra's file and showed it to her. "As you have also heard, and read in your Bible, here in Heaven there is no time. Nevertheless, your witness, Sabrina, lived many happy years on earth after you passed away. But she stands here today as your witness. And though it took many years on earth for Princess Sabrina's death, it was an instant in Heaven.

The day of her death took many earth years, and your death was many earth years ago, but here, where there is no time, both deaths were instant and at the same time in Heaven."

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Sandra remained quiet, so Moses continued, "With this said, Sandra, by special permission granted by the King; ["King Jesus, King Jesus, …"] your witness would like to speak to you. This is hardly ever allowed. But The Christ has given permission to Princess Sabrina to speak with you before your sentencing. You and she will be taken to a private room. It is in that room that the two of you will be able to speak together, but I do not want you to think you have hope, Sandra. That is not the reason for this meeting. There will be nothing she can say to you or do for you to change your sentencing, and this is not her intentions.

She merely wants to say one last time, how's she loved your friendship. And how she was inspired by your generosity. And finally, she desired to tell you how gravely sorry she is that you will be departing from here and will be moving on to eternity in a different direction than her.

But hear this Sandra. In Heaven, there is no sadness. So you see, she will not shed a tear for you and your choice that you made not to give your life to Christ."

Sandra interrupted Moses to say that she understood. But no reminders from the guard were given to her, to remain silent.

Moses nodded at her and wrote something down. Then, he looked to the guard and said, "Guard, please escort the accused with Princes Sabrina to the

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green room." He looked back at Sabrina and told her, "When you are finished, we will be waiting for you. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, be with you."

When they were seated, the door to the green room shut. Sandra wanted to hug Sabrina, but Sabrina said, "Sorry, I am now a Princess, and I'm in my perfect state; you may not touch me."

Sandra understood and shook her head in understanding. And, just as Moses told Sandra, Sabrina spoke to Sandra about life on earth; when they were friends. She went on to tell Sandra how inspired she was by her generosity. How she we would give so much of herself and wanted nothing in return. She went on speaking for a very long time. In fact, if measured by earth time, weeks would have passed, but in Heaven, it lasted only moments.

"Sandra, before we depart, I have a question for you."

Sandra didn't say anything, so Sabrina continued, "When we would go to the mall to walk, you would often give $10, even if it was the last $10 in your wallet, to at little old man that would sit at the table. Why?"

Sandra didn't want to answer the question at first. Rather, she wanted to know if Sabrina was a true princess as Jesus was referred to as being a prince.

"I am," said Sabrina. "And my earthly husband is a prince. And, the same is true for Prince Darren and my earthly children."

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"Then, Sabrina, if you are a princess, certainly you should be able to talk them into letting me stay here."

"Sandra, it doesn't work like that. Judge Moses had already instructed you concerning this. The King has already judged you from his throne. He declared you guilty of an unrepentant heart and for your disbelief. Moses has already told you this. This is not new to you, Sandra. In a little while, your sentence will be carried out, and I will never see or think of you again."

"Oh, how nice of you my friend. And you want me to answer your question."

"You do not have to answer, if you do not want to. I only wanted you to know, because, do you remember the essay that I told you about, the one that the boy had a friend die and his father died shortly afterward?"

"Yes. Sabrina, unfortunately I remember everything from earth, as I believe so do you."

"I do. Well, the boy that that man wrote about…"

"Dan," supplied Sabrina.

"Yes, Dan."

"I remember. What about him?"

"Well, Dan was like you. The boy that was friends with him, the one that wrote the essay, he, his friends, and some of his family used to talk to him about Christ. His mom used to take him to church, just like you would go to church with me."

"And your question is? Where are you going with this *Princess* Sabrina? What is your point to this?"

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"Well, you see, like you, Dan knew all the correct things to say. He knew all the right Bible verses. And yet, you will not see him up here."

"Well Sabrina, it turns out I won't be seeing very many people here. From what I have heard, I've got a one way ticket out of here, and the bus is warming up."

"True. But the reason I am telling you this is, the man that you used to give your money to, is the boy's uncle. And like the boy, he did not believe in his heart. But, because of your generosity, and your willingness to give to him opened his eyes. Sandra, you were instrumental in leading this man to salvation. The same is true to the many girls that you witnessed to from the abortion clinic."

"Great. Why are you telling all of this to me? Did you think that I need a little salt rubbed into my wound? Do you find joy telling me that they get to stay and I have to go? Is this some kind of twisted thing that the Royal family gets to do? Some kind of hazing ritual or something?"

"I only wanted you to know."

"Well, Sabrina, know this, your little story that you just told me, it does me no good. As everyone is so eager to tell me around here, I'm going to Hell. And, really soon I might add."

"Yes, but you were part of the salvation for that poor old man and those young girls."

"Again, how does that help me remain here?"

"It doesn't. But it did not go unnoticed and you will be rewarded for it."

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Sandra had heard enough and stood up. She then went to the door; it opened automatically. The guard walked up to Sandra and escorted her back to the courtroom. Sabrina followed.

Back in the courtroom, Judge Moses told Sandra, "Sandra, because you have been instrumental in the salvation of Earnest Blackwell, the elderly man that you gave your money to in the mall each week, and several young ladies that you witnessed to, this court has been given permission to extend grace unto you."

Sandra exclaimed, "I can stay?! I am staying here in Heaven?!"

This would have been followed with a friendly reminder by the guard not to speak while Judge Moses was speaking, but Moses made a motion to the guard that indicated that he would allow the interruption. Then he continued, "No, Sandra, you are not staying. You have already been damned to Hell for your unbelief, and there is nothing that can be done about that now."

"But, you said you're going to give me grace."

"Yes, Sandra, we are. Well, the King is."

"But, I do not understand. Why am I not staying? Why the grace? What good is it?"

"The grace that you have been granted is; you will be given a certain level of protection from your tormentors in Hell."

If Sandra were wearing the customary chains, you would have heard rattling as the word tormentors played over and over in her head.

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Judge Moses wrapped up Sandra's hearing at this point. There was nothing left to be said to Sandra. She was about to be sent away from God and Heaven and into Hell for all eternity.

Sabrina had already exited the courtroom. She was ready to move on. Prior to the hearing, Jesus assured Sabrina that none of what happened was her fault. It was not for any lack on her part that her one time friend did not give her heart to Jesus. It was her choice; one that could no longer be reconciled.

Moses said to the guard, "It is time for her sentencing." Then he looked at Sandra and told her that she was now required to confess something that she should have confessed years ago, while she still had hope.

As Sandra bowed low upon her knees, she made her final confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord." After saying them, Sandra felt the sting and weight of these words and thought to herself, "If only."

Moses looked to the guard, stood and went down to the courtroom floor, and exited through the chamber door.

The guard bowed to Moses in compliance, and walked Sandra to her eternal destiny.

But before they came to the door of justice, Sandra turned and asked the guard, "Will you tell Sabrina something for me? Please tell her that I am sorry."

The guard said, "Yes, I will do that. But, I'm afraid,

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Sandra, that she won't know who you are when I tell her. She would by now had already forgotten you."

"Oh," said Sandra. "Well, could you please tell her anyway?"

The guard said, "Yes, I will tell her."

He then opened up the door, pointed to the blackness beyond, and said, "Be gone. Sandra, your punishment for your unbelief awaits you."

Sandra walked through the doorway and into the abyss. The guard shut the door, turned, and walked away.

And true to his word, the guard found Sabrina and told her what Sandra wanted him to say—Sabrina replied, "Sandra who?"

Viper's Witness

"Don't look down, don't look down."

"Dude, you sure are afraid of heights. This ain't nothing. You should have seen some of the towers that Dragon and I would climb. We climbed towers way higher than this—in the dark I might add."

Eddie shot back, "Good for you."

"Whoa, did you see that?" Viper said, as he was pointing down below, "Some dude's shoe just fell off and missed that girl by about an inch."

"Don't tell me things like that. I'm already freaked out up here." Eddie sounded quite nervous as he said this and his voice cracked.

Viper, unfazed by the height found it comical, and laughed at his friend. He told him to open his eyes and look down. And then he added, "Dude, it was so cool. An inch to the left and she would've been knocked out cold."

Eddie, trying to regain some respect from his friend, forced himself to sound more relaxed,

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"Almost, but not quite; I hope for her sake. I imagine that she has the hebejebes now."

Viper was going to tease Eddie some more, but Eddie's last comment made Viper's jaw drop, "Oh, man, speaking of the hebejebes, now I have them."

"Why, because you just realized that you are afraid of heights too?"

Viper started to answer, "No, not that. I was…"

Just then the brakes let go which allowed the riders the thrill of falling that they were seeking. Viper and Eddie were on the Giant Drop at Six Flags Great America, when their conversation was interrupted momentarily as the car they were on plunged back to earth.

Eddie, looking a little green lifted up the shoulder harness, "Oh, man, I'm not sure if I should hate that ride or love it."

Viper laughed at his friend, "Love it, dude. I sure do."

As they were leaving through the ride's exit, Eddie made the mistake of looking up. If it weren't for Viper looking at his phone, he would have seen the look on his friend's face. Eddie, glad that he didn't, repeated his last question to Viper, "So, you were saying, why do you have the hebejebes?"

"Oh yeah, it's because we just finished saying, 'an inch to the left' and 'almost but not quite.'"

"And? So?"

"Well, I just had a similar conversation with this lady in a hospital gift shop. And so when you and I said this, I thought, whoa, that's weird."

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Eddied asked, "Why were you in the hospital?"

"No reason."

Eddie wanted to ask Viper, who goes to the hospital for no reason? But then again, Eddie thought, Viper did a lot of things for no reason these days. Things that he imagined he wouldn't have done before he found religion. And certainly, it wouldn't be when he hung out with his friend, Dragon. So, instead he asks, "So, Vipe, what's with your friend Dragon? That dude scares me. Did you ever notice that he is the only person that your dog barks at?"

Viper's initial thought was, "Yeah, I know what you mean, the dude scares me too; come to think of it, he always has." But not wanting to feel like he was talking bad about his friend, he just shrugged his shoulders. Eddie didn't press the question further which made Viper happy. He didn't want to talk bad about one friend to another. He hated when others did that, and he didn't want to end up saying something that he would later regret.

"Ah, and speaking of Dragon, after that crazy ride," (pointing back toward the Giant Drop) "let's go ride something tamer like, The Dragon."

"The Dragon? Oh, you mean The Demon."

"Yeah, that one."

Viper looked at Eddie, "Serious? That's a kiddy ride. If you want to ride a coaster, let's ride one named after yours truly. "

Eddie pretended to suck his thumb, "Please…"

"All right, fine. But if anyone sees us on that ride,

you're dead." Then added, "You know, if you had remembered your swim trunks like I told you, we'd be in the water park right now. But no, you had to be a dork and forget them."

Eddie punched Viper in the arm.

Viper shot him a look and said, "Do you want me to go on The Demon or not?"

"*I sorry.*" Eddie, doing his best little kid imitation.

"You better be," Viper sounded serious. By the look on Eddie's face, a little too serious. So, he quickly added, "Just kidding. Besides, it's probably a little too chilly for the water park anyway."

After they got off The Demon, Viper told Eddie that it was his turn to pick the next ride. "Okay, now that we got kiddy land over with; it's time for a real ride."

"Which one's that? The bumper cars?"

"You wish. Nope, it's starting to feel like a little V2 action is necessary."

"Oh, that ride. Yeah. Well, I've been on that ride before."

"You have? But it's tall."

"Yeah, but I just keep my eyes shut."

"Shut up; you sissy."

"Sorry, not everyone has a cool nickname and climbs towers in the dark for fun."

"Well, you would have if you hung out with us at the time. The more you told Dragon that you didn't want to do something, the more persistent he became."

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Eddie swallowed, "Lucky for me."

When Viper and Eddie got to the ride, Eddie pointed out the long line. "It looks like it is going to be quite a wait. Are you sure that you don't want to go on that ride instead?"

Viper looked where Eddie was pointing with his head, "The swings? Tell me you're joking."

Eddie lied, "Duh. Of course I'm joking."

40 minutes later, Viper and Eddie exited V2. Viper told Eddie, "Dude, I love that ride. It's one of the best rides here."

"Yeah, it is," Eddie said, trying to sound like he had fun. Then he made the same mistake that he had when he exited the Giant Drop, as he looked up to see how tall the ride was. After doing so, he was glad that he had his eyes shut.

"So now what?" asked Eddie.

"Kings Chaos," exclaimed Viper.

Eddie repeated back, "Kings Chaos? Well, at least it isn't tall."

Viper pat Eddie on the shoulder and told him that he was funny.

A short time later, they exited the ride and Viper smiled at his friend. He looked a little frazzled, but all things considered, he still looked as though he had fun on the ride. However, not knowing just how much Eddie's stomach was still spinning on the inside, Viper suggested riding Superman as their next ride. And since Eddie didn't object, they made their way to the coaster.

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Viper and Eddie spent the rest of their day at Six Flags. As they went from ride to ride, they talked about many things. Everything that typical young males talk about: girls, cars, sports, and friends. And being that they hardly had opportunities to do this, since they both have been very busy working lately, the two enjoyed their time together. But as content as they were being just the two of them, when they ran into a group of friends while eating dinner at the food court, one of the boys decided that the place was lame and announced that he was going to go to a party. Peer pressure as it is, led this to snowball into everyone deciding to leave; Eddie and Viper included.

And though Viper went along, he wasn't too happy about it. The habits of his old friends were not what Viper desired. Viper's Bible told him that he was a new creation and that he should not love the things of the world. But sometimes his flesh would long for the partying scene, even if he no longer partook in the drinking and smoking.

Viper's friends, those that knew him longer than some of the newer boys that they hung out with, knew that at one time, Viper could give any one of them a run for their money when it came to doing stupid or dangerous things.

Because of this, some of them liked to tempt him with the things that they did. They did this for a couple of reasons. One, they wanted to see if the little church boy would give into his temptations and prove to be no different from them. And two, because it was fun tempting him.

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However, Eddie never took part in this. Instead, he would often watch from a distance to see how Viper handled the temptations and the ribbings from the other guys.

He was always impressed that Viper never gave in and thought that he handled himself masterfully. Later, this would lead Eddie to ask Viper questions about his faith.

And since nothing pleased Viper more to talk about God and his faith, he was grateful to God for the opportunity. But as it turned out, on the day that Eddie found the courage to ask Viper about his faith, they got interrupted.

"That's a good question, Eddie. I guess the best way that I can describe it is…"

"Howdy boys."

When Viper heard Dragon's voice, he grimaced. He was just making progress with Eddie, when Dragon showed up. And wherever it was or whoever was around; when Dragon showed up, it put everybody on edge, sometimes even Viper. However, it was even more so for Eddie; he was most certainly on edge in Dragon's presence.

Dragon and Viper were childhood friends and had done many bad things together growing up. Hurting people in many ways and doing things that made Viper cringed when he thought about it.

Viper almost died several times from doing dangerous things like fighting total strangers with baseball bats to jumping off hotel roofs into snow

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banks, not to mention the amount of alcohol and drugs that he took. He broke a few bones now and then and ended up with many scares. But somehow he always managed to survive.

Dragon, on the other hand, he never seemed to get seriously hurt or harmed in any way. This used to freak Viper out. He would often wonder, "Why is this dude so, *protected?*"

In their prime, others came and went within the group, but for the most part, Viper and Dragon were the ones that lived like there was no tomorrow. This went on for years. But, it wasn't until Viper was on his last straw with the courts, that God assigned a correctional officer to prepare Viper for his new life.

Growing up in the courts, Viper had a few correctional officers in his time. But when he met Bill Matthews, the first correctional officer that actually cared about Viper, his eyes were open to a new life in God; something that he never thought about while jumping off bridges into ice cold water.

And though Viper became a Christian, he never stopped hanging out with Dragon. Although, he no longer did the dangerous, mean, or illegal things.

Dragon didn't seem to care much about Viper's conversion one way, or another. In fact, besides Eddie, Dragon was the only one that didn't make fun of Viper for becoming a Christian.

It used to make Viper wonder why Dragon never talked about his lifelong friend becoming something that he clearly had no intention of becoming or

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concerned himself about. And it made Viper wonder all the more, why Dragon did not hold it against him. This is something that Viper could never figure out, and it was something that he worried about; often. But then one day he read in a book, a quote that you should keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. This led Viper to wonder if Dragon now considered him his enemy. If so, he did not want to know.

As Dragon walked over to Viper and Eddie, he read the back of Viper's shirt, 'But Jesus Does.' He made a slight frown as he read it, but Viper's back was to Dragon, so he didn't see his friend's frown. Eddie didn't see Dragon's frown either, because he was too busy thinking of a reason why he had to go.

"Yo Vipe, what's up?"

Viper turned around and caught Dragons eye as he read the front of his T-shirt. It read, 'I hear voices, and they don't like you.' Viper wondered what Dragon thought about what it said on the back. If it bothered Dragon, he didn't let on.

"Hey, Dragon."

The two shared a fist bump and then went through an extended handshake that they made up years ago.

At one time it meant that they had each other's back, and though neither of the boys said the words aloud, they both have thought in recent months that they had their doubts if it still held true.

"Love the shirt, dude,"

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Viper, trying to sound casual replied, "It was a gift from your mom."

Dragon shot back with, "Didn't anyone ever tell you that it's not nice to talk about the dead like that?"

A flashback of Viper running into Dragon and his mom at a local restaurant the week before came to Viper, which made him flinch because the two had been arguing about something. She had her finger in Dragon's face; something Viper thought to be unwise, even if she was his mother.

"Shut up. How can she be dead, I just saw you with her last week."

"I stabbed her that night while she was sleeping. And then, I chopped her up and ate her." Dragon licked his lips and added, "Pretty tasty."

Dragon's comment had two different effects: The thought that Dragon might be telling the truth made Eddie almost pee his pants. And it made him feel that he needed to think of a good excuse to leave; fast. So he put his thought process into overdrive. For Viper, Dragon's sense of humor had always been that way, and it didn't shock him *too much*, but still, one could never know when Dragon might be telling the truth about such things.

In fact, this comment reminded Viper about the time that he went over to Dragon's apartment, and he was eating a sandwich. After asking Dragon what he was eating, he told Viper that it was the annoying neighbor kid. The weird thing was;

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Viper never saw that kid hanging out in front of his apartment doing jumps on a makeshift ramp ever again. This made Viper wonder if Dragon was telling the truth, or if the kid went off to college or something like that. But, being that Viper couldn't imagine even Dragon doing something like this, he gave his friend the benefit of the doubt that we was only kidding.

"Yeah? Do you have any leftovers?"

When Eddie heard Viper ask this question he shot a look at Viper that was between disappointment and disgust. Viper smiled at Eddie warily and shrugged his shoulders. He thought to himself, "Some witness, I am." Then he made a mental note that he would apologize and explain to Eddie later.

"Nah, I put the rest in a stew and brought it to my church potluck dinner."

Thinking that Dragon would rather be set on fire than go to a church, Viper laughed as he told him, "That's just wrong dude. Those poor unsuspecting old ladies."

"Well, if I knew that you two would have been hungry, I'd brought a couple of sandwiches." With this, Dragon turned his attention to Eddie. "So what's your story? You're still hanging out with the Vipe, I see. But don't let his goodie-goodie demeanor fool you." (Dragon pointed his thumb in Vipers direction) "This kid might look innocent now, but I've seen him do things to others that would make your skin crawl."

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When Viper heard this, he wished that Dragon would keep his comments to himself. And when Eddie heard this, he wished to be somewhere else.

So Eddie responded with, "Yeah, so I have heard. But I keep a close eye on him. "

"Yeah? That's a good idea. And whatever you do, don't turn your back on him, you just never know what this dude is capable of."

Eddie quickly responded, "Well, speaking of things to do; I've got a ton of stuff to take care of before I go to work. I'll see you later Viper. Dragon."

Dragon nodded in Eddie's direction.

And Viper told Eddie, "Okay, sounds good." Then he remembered the conversation they were in before Dragon showed up, and followed up with, "Hey, can we finish our discussion tonight after work?"

"Yeah, sure, Viper. I don't think that I have anything going on."

"Cool. See you then," Viper said to his friend and hoped he would be able to regain the faith talk moment with Eddie. Viper thought to himself, "It was just like the enemy to try to intervene." But his thought was interrupted when Dragon asked, "So what were you two talking about?"

Viper repudiated, "We were exchanging recipes."

"Oh, I should join you guys, then. I could give you some tips on making appetizers. I can make some killer *finger* food if you know what I mean."

Viper smiled and shook his head, "Yumm," then concluded with, "Well, maybe next time."

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Dragon hung out with Viper for the next couple of hours shooting hoops and doing crazy stunts on the trampoline. They even got out their cell phones to record some videos to upload to YouTube.

Viper didn't mind hanging out with Dragon, for the most part. After all, he was part of his past, and like it or not, it was Viper's past that helped define who he was today. But though he liked to share his faith with Eddie, and anyone else for that matter, he never felt compelled to share it with Dragon.

"Well, dude, it's been real," Dragon said to Viper as he put his phone back into his pocket. "But I've got some important business to attend to." This usually meant that he was off to buy something to smoke or drink.

"Okay. Well, tell your mom I said hello."

Dragon pat his stomach, "You just did," and followed it up with a loud burp.

Viper played along and waved to Dragon's stomach, "Good-bye, Mrs. Brackston."

With that, the two fist bumped and did their handshake.

"Later."

"Later," Viper agreed.

After Dragon left, Viper went back inside his home and went to his bedroom to read. He wanted to freshen up with the verses that he referred to as the Roman's Road.

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Several hours later, Eddie and Viper shared a few text messages and made arrangements to meet up at the skate park.

If you were able to see into the spiritual world, you would have seen two huge angels accompanying Viper as he walked toward the park—both with swords drawn. And at the park where Eddie was waiting for his friend, you would have seen three very large and ugly demonic looking creatures, and they too, had swords drawn.

And if you were able to see all of this, you would have seen quite a battle. But when it was all over, Eddie would no longer be flanked by his usual companions. Because now, and for the rest of his life, Eddie would have a bodyguard named, Hashmal, and on his shield was the Alpha and Omega symbol.

Viper approached the swings where Eddie was slowly swinging back and forth, doing something with his phone. "Hey Eddie, how was work?"

"Work was work," Eddie responded. Then added, "You know, SSDD."

"I hear you." Even the shortened version of this saying made Viper uncomfortable these days, but he would have replied with something far more vulgar than that, not too many years ago.

"So did you have fun hanging out with Dragon? Man, that dude is super creepy. Who talks about eating their mom? I don't know how someone like you, could hang out with such a freak."

Viper ignored Eddie's questions and comments

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and said, "Oh yeah, about that. I'm sorry about how I was talking with Dragon. I still catch myself getting caught up in his craziness." Viper didn't like the way that it came out, followed it up with, "Well, I mean, not craziness, I didn't mean to insinuate that he is crazy, just his sense of humor."But to Eddie, Viper hit the nail right on the head the first time; Dragon was crazy. And apparently, deadly too.

"Well, enough talk about Dragon. Earlier, before we were interrupted by, you know who…," Eddie offered a weak smile in response to Viper's clever way not to mention Dragon's name again. "You were asking me about my faith. And I was telling you about how this one correctional officer was sharing with me, how Christianity turned his life around. He told me about a lot of what I would consider minor stuff, or sins that he committed in his life, but because he was now a Christian, he no longer lived like that. So I told him, well that's all good and everything, but my sins, if you want to call them that, are a lot worse off than yours. He said to me, "I know about your past. Your past is why you are here to meet with me. Your file indicates that you've done some bad things, but not terrible."

"What did you say to him?"

"I laughed. I said, dude, do you really think that stuff in my file is all that I have done? Don't be naïve, man. That stuff in my file is only the stuff that I got caught doing. I've done far worse things than that."

"What did he say to that?"

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"Well, I thought he was going to say, "Like what kind of stuff?" You know, so they can pin something on me. But what he did next took me by surprise."

"What's that?"

"He said that it didn't matter. He didn't work for the correctional service—he worked for God."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Well, at first I didn't know what he was getting at, so I let him continue. And so the more he talked, the more I listened and was intrigued with what he had to say. Little by little I started to let my guard down and started trusting him. I still didn't tell him anything bad, but the cool thing was; he told me he didn't want to know. He said that it was between me and God. And God was waiting for me to confess that stuff to him so that he could forgive me and give me new life."

"New life?"

"Yup. I'm born again."

"What do you mean, born again? How?"

Viper thought to himself, "Bingo!" and said a quick prayer. "Please Lord; don't let me mess this up. And if it pleases you, please allow me the honor to reap the harvest. Amen." Then he said to Eddie, "The best way I can explain this is to you is the way my correction officer told me."

For the next 40 minutes, Viper explained the Romans Road verses to his friend. And as he did, just like Viper had done before him, Eddie questioned each step of the way.

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"It starts off with the fundamentally basic truth about all people."

"And that is?"

"We are all sinners."

"Sure, I heard that before."

"Well, maybe. But perhaps not like this. The Bible says that all people sin, Eddie. There is none that is good, not even one."

"Nobody? Not even the television evangelists?"

"Yikes, especially them. Don't watch the TV preachers, Eddie. Too many of them let the money and fame warp their way of doing ministry. Some of them might have gone into ministries for good reasons, but now that they have money and power, they turned. They became greedy and are leading many unsuspecting people away from Christ."

"Okay… Then, what about Mother Teresa? She wasn't good?"

"She did good things, but she was still a sinner and as a sinner, she was incapable of doing good; all the time."

"So then what? How do people go to Heaven?"

"That my friend, is an excellent question. And it is the most important question you will ever ask in your life. The answer to that question can be found in the Bible. The Bible says that, because we sin, the wages for that sin is death." Eddie just nodded his head slowly indicating that he was listening, and taking it all in. So, Viper continued. "And being that you have to be without sin to enter Heaven, all people, are in the same boat. None of us can get

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into Heaven on our own merit because, we have all sinned. In fact, people are born into sin. Because of that, no one is good, Eddie. But, but there was one who did not sin, not even one sin in his entire life. And he was good, because he was born without sin. He, and he alone, was the only person that has ever lived without sin. And so he alone was the only one that could go to Heaven on his own merit."

"So how does that help me? How did you become a Christian? "

"That, is another good question. In fact, it is a great question. This person, that did not sin; is Jesus."

"Jesus? He is real? I just thought that he was this fictional character you hear about. Or kind of like the expression that people say whenever they were mad or excited about something."

"Well, you're right. People do use his name in a bad way, which is sin. But, he is, and will always certainly will be, real. Real perfect. Real love. Real powerful. Real forgiving, and really concerned for your soul, Eddie."

"My soul? What do you mean, my soul?"

Viper was on a roll now. And without anyone there to distract them, he and Eddie's conversation couldn't be going any better. Eddie was ready. He was right at the door with his hand on the knob, ready to open it up so that Christ could enter into his heart. And, Christ was there too. He was about to do another miracle; the miracle of rebirth. All that was needed was for Eddie to realize and accept

that fact that he was a sinner and that he needed forgiveness for his sins. And as Viper told his friend that there was only one person that could do that, the one that committed no sin, but yet died on a cross between two thieves. All for the sake of those that would come to him to confess their sins, repent, and receive his forgiveness. Eddie was listening. And as he listened to Viper with his ears, God was speaking to his spirit. And the more he listened, the more he wanted this new life.

And as he was about to make this decision to receive this new life, in the spiritual world, the battle was in full swing. If you could see what was going on, you would have seen flashes of light as swords clanged into one another and into the shields. And the moment that Eddie announced to his friend that he too wanted what Viper described, that he wanted a new life and to be born again, the sound of screeching and whaling from the defeated enemy would have made your eardrums burst and your skull turn inside out.

"Viper, I want that. I want what you have. What do I do?"

Viper smiled, looked toward the sky, and mouthed the words, "Thank you." Then he led Eddie through his first prayer that he ever said in his life. And at that moment, Eddie gave his life over to Jesus. And in return, Jesus gave Eddie new life. He was now, reborn. And later, many years later, when Judge Moses would look into the book that sat on his desk,

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he would find, Eddie J. Jackson, followed by two dates. His day of birth, and the most important date; the day of his rebirth.

"That's it?" Eddie asked Viper.

"That's it. You my friend are now born again and are now a child of God. Welcome to the family, Eddie."

"I'm a, ah, I'm a Christina now?"

"Yes, Eddie, you are now my brother and fellow follower of Christ; a Christian."

"Viper, I don't know what to say. I've never had a friend like you. And I've never heard anyone talk about God and the Bible like you. You are a lot more religious than I thought."

Viper's response to Eddie's comment was an explanation of the difference between being in a religion and being saved. He told him that the Bible says that there will be people that will go to Hell because they were caught up in being in a religion. He told Eddie that on judgment day, God will say to those that did not have a relationship with Jesus, that he did not know them, and they will be cast into Hell."

"Even if they went to Church, they can still go to Hell?"

"Sure. It is sad and difficult to understand, but some people just want fire insurance. They go to church just because they think that when they die, God will allow them into Heaven because they went to church. Others do good deeds because they think

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that if they do enough good deeds, God will ignore the sins they have committed. But remember what we just talked about? What is the qualification to get into Heaven?"

Eddie felt a little unsure of himself as he repeated back to Viper what he had just learned and led him to eternal life,

"You have to be sinless."

"Yup. You have to be sinless or in other words, you have to be perfect. And who is the only one that is perfect?"

"Only Jesus is perfect. Christ was the only one that did not sin."

"Correct. And so how do you go to Heaven?"

"Only through Christ."

"Only through Christ what?" Viper pressed Eddie on the issue because he knew the importance for Eddie to be clear in his mind what it means to be saved. He had heard his pastor say numerous times that all too often people recite a prayer, and they think that they are saved. But when adversity came, many fell away because the prayer they said came from their head and not from their heart.

"Only by giving Christ your heart can you go to Heaven."

"So if I cut open my chest, take out my heart, and hand it in the air, Christ will come from Heaven to take it?"

"No."

"Then how do I offer my heart to Christ?"

"Just like you told me, you confess that you are a

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sinner and that you are sorry for your sins and you want Jesus to help you not to sin anymore. And by doing that he becomes your Lord, and you are saved because it is giving your heart over to him. You are no longer in control of your life."

"That's awesome, Eddie. I couldn't have said that any better. What you just described to me is called repentance."

"What exactly is repentance?"

"I've heard it explained as, changing your mind or going in the opposite direction."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, you changed your mind about your being in control of your life. You have now given that control to Jesus. And by doing that, you are going in a different direction. You are no longer headed on the path that leads to Hell. You, my brother, are on the path that leads to the narrow gate."

"Narrow gate?"

"Yup. The narrow gate is Jesus."

"And that is repentance?"

"Exactly. And by the sounds of it, this is what just took place in your life. Is that true?"

"Yes, I told you this."

Viper laughed, "I know my friend. I only asked you so that you would be able to grasp the difference between faith and going to church. It is one thing to confess your sin. That is easy, because all of us sin. But, confessing your sins without being truly sorry for them is denying Christ, his rightful control of your life."

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"It seems that I have a lot to learn."

"You sure do, Eddie. We all do. That is called sanctification. But don't worry about that right now. It will take some time to learn about your faith and to grow in your knowledge of the Bible. For now, what you did tonight was the first and most important step in the Christian walk. The world is going to treat you differently now. Because of your faith, some people will dislike you. The enemy, God's enemy, is going to try to discourage you. So that is why it is important to read the Bible, pray, and to be with other believers by going to church."

"Then, can I ask you a question Viper?"

"Sure, I'll do my best to answer."

"It's about Dragon. If what you say is true, that the world will hate us, and we need to hang out with other Christians, then why do you remain friends with Dragon?"

Eddie's question stung Viper a lot more than he let on, "Well, yeah, that is an excellent question. I wonder the same thing at times. I guess I have a hard time letting go of our friendship because of all of the things that we have done together. Things that should have killed either one or both of us, but we survived."

"Like what?"

Viper laughed nervously, "Oh man, like a lot of things." He paused for a moment to recall something he could share, "Okay, here's one. Remember when we were on the Giant Drop, and you were scared of the height?"

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"Umm, sure. So?"

"Well, if you recall, I said that we would climb towers, really high towers; in the dark."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well, this one time we were way up there, probably halfway to the top when Dragon noticed that we were not too far from a tree that was leaning toward the tower. It probably fell down from a windstorm or something. Well anyway, I wasn't sure how far from the tower it really was, and in the dark, it was hard to be certain. But it must not have seemed too far to Dragon."

"Why?"

"Because he dared me to jump off the tower into the tree. He said that if I jumped off just right, I could catch the one limb to break my fall."

"What did you do?"

"I jumped."

"Did you catch the limb?"

"No. I missed it completely."

"What happened?"

"I landed on my back on the ground. The ground was really soft and mossy, but I should have died, or at least broken my back. When I went back out there in the daylight, a few days later, I couldn't believe how high I fell."

"Did Dragon jump?"

"No."

"What? Why not?"

"I'm not sure. But I am glad that he didn't, because after he saw that I missed the tree, he climbed back

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down, thinking that I must be dead. When he saw that I was still alive, he laughed his head off. But afterward, when he stopped laughing, he helped me up. I was in a lot of pain and could hardly walk."

"What did he do?"

"He carried me on his back all the way to his car."

"Dragon carried you on his back?"

"I know, right? But it was things like that, that made us very close. We were there for one another. I trusted him, and he trusted me."

"Hmm, I guess it would be hard to stop hanging around with him. He seems like a good friend."

Viper held up both of his hands toward Eddie, "Oh, I wouldn't go that far to say that, Eddie. You. You are a friend; a true friend. What Dragon and I have, well, had, is something different; something unexplainable. It's like we are connected."

The two friends stayed a while longer at the park to talk. Afterward, Viper walked Eddie home—so did his new bodyguard.

Over the next few weeks, Eddie had more and more questions for Viper. Some he could answer and some he could not. So, Viper got his friend to ask for Sunday mornings off at his job and the two went to church together; faithfully.

Viper introduced Eddie to his pastor and several of the men in his church. They got him a Bible and showed Eddie what to read, and where to go when he had questions. And though the enemy was not

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happy about his conversion, Eddie stayed true to the course and grew stronger and stronger in his faith. As a result, he and Viper were closer than they have ever been before.

And though Dragon still made Eddie feel uneasy, it was not to the point that he did before his conversion. Instead of running off when Dragon came by, Eddie would stay and pray for Dragon; silently of course. He figured that though he was excited about going to Heaven; he certainly didn't want to end up as someone's sandwich.

Despite the fact that Eddie never told Dragon about his new life, Dragon sensed something different about Eddie. To Dragon, Eddie smelled funny; he smelled like Viper. It was a stench that Dragon was used to and accepted because smelling funny or not; he still liked Viper. But, on the other hand, Dragon could care less about Eddie one way or another. In fact, Dragon would think from time to time that he would end Eddie's life if he ever gave him the slightest reason. Fortunately, for Eddie, he never knew that Dragon thought this. Because if he did, it would have kept him up nights; watching and waiting. But he wouldn't wait alone; Hashmal would be right there beside him with his sword.

But, as it turns out, somewhere, in another place, not of this earth, and not in Heaven, *somebody* was starting to miss Dragon and wanted him to come home. As a result, plans were set into motion to prepare Dragon for his hearing, and his homecoming.

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It all started with a visit to church.

"Don't make me come up there," Dragon shouted at his bedroom ceiling. The music from the apartment above him was a little too loud for his liking. Visions of human pot roast started swirling in his head. However, instead of letting it get the best of him, and turning it into something real bad for the loud music lover, Dragon decided to pay his friend, Viper a visit.

Knocking on his front door, Dragon said, "Knock, knock, it's the grim reaper here to take your soul."

Viper looked up from his video game, and smiled at Dragon standing on his front porch, "Sorry Grim, but my soul is already been taken by another. Try down the street." After saying this, Viper felt ashamed. He wondered to himself, "Why do I always say dumb things when he is around?"

Dragon not bothering to wait for an invite to come in, opened the door and walked in singing a song that Viper was not familiar with, and by the sounds of it, he didn't want to.

Viper asked, "What put you into such a good mood?"

"Music," Dragon responded with a big smile, then added, "It almost cost someone their life though."

"Oh? How's that?" Viper asked as Dragon approached him. They did their fist bump and handshake.

Then Dragon sat next to Viper and picked up the second controller, "Start the game over, and I'll teach you how to play this stupid game."

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Viper came back with, "Oh yeah? You think so?" Then he did what his old friend requested. After all, he knew it would do little good to inform Dragon that he was about to break his own personal best score.

As Viper was resetting the game, Dragon asked, "Speaking of music, what is this that you are listening to? It's got a sick beat."

"Oh yeah, you like it huh? They are called Demon Hunter. The name of the song is *Summer of Darkness*."

"Demon Hunter, that's swag. Never heard of them though." Then he mocked Viper, "So are you in training?"

"For?"

"Demon hunting."

Viper let out a quick laugh, then gave Dragon a long look and raised both eyebrows, as he asked, "Since when are you interested in what I think about demons?"

"Ouch, Viper, that hurts. You know that I care."

Viper just smiled at him. Dragon continued, "There is only one person in this world that I would be willing to die for. Thus, Viper, my one true friend, if or when that day comes, make it memorable; because I sure will."

Viper found this to be a very interesting statement. At one time in his life, he would have felt the same toward Dragon, but not anymore. He still liked Dragon, but he knew deep inside that Dragon was worse than lost; he was evil. And it took many sleepless nights for Viper to wrestle through the

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reasons why he still hung out with Dragon, and considered him a friend. In the end, it just seemed right to be his friend and sensed it was what God wanted. He attributed it to be similar to a quote that many Christians were fond of saying, hate the sin, but love the sinner. However, for Viper, it was hate the demon, but love the man who was demon possessed.

Viper felt it was his duty to remain friends with Dragon. And for reasons he couldn't explain or understand, he felt that he was chosen to be Dragon's guide. Guide to what, he hated to think about.

Certainly, all of the things that the two have done and been through made strong bonds between them and nobody would have given it a second thought if Viper stopped hanging out with Dragon after his conversion.

When Viper thought about it, he didn't know if he should be angry at those whom he trusted within the church for not being more diligent to protect him from Dragon, or not. So, he just assumed that God gave them the same marching orders that He gave Viper; it was his responsibility to deliver or perhaps guide his friend to what awaits him.

Sometimes Viper wondered whenever this was to happen, would it also mean the end of his life. But, when thoughts of this nature came to his mind, Viper dismissed them. It didn't matter. If so, Heaven awaited him. All he knew was, he wanted to be obedient to God's leading. If that meant it took his life to do so; then so be it.

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Dragon got up from the couch and walked over to the fridge, peered inside, and then closed it with a sigh, "You never have anything in this icebox."

However, Viper didn't pay much attention to Dragon's complaint because he was still trying to process Dragon's comment, but couldn't find the words that seemed to fit. So he went with, "Well Dragon, I'm flattered."

Dragon now had the freezer door open. He was digging through the popsicle assortment, trying to find something less repulsive than the seemingly endless supply of root beer flavored popsicles. He found the only one in the freezer that was not root beer; grape. Dragon grimaced, but thought that it at least had to be better than the alternative.

Dragon shut the door and started to unwrap the grape popsicle, and then realized that his friend just responded to his claim of loyalty, "Umm, well, you should be."He then walked back to the couch and sat next to Viper, looked him the eyes and asked him a question. It was a question that Viper would have never guessed Dragon to ask; ever. So when Dragon asked, Viper was confused and thought that he must not have heard what Dragon was asking, "What?"

Dragon smiled at Viper, "You heard me."

"Why would I invite you to my church? I know you better than any person that I know."

"I know. Me too. And that's why I would die for you."

"Okay, then, Dragon, you must also know that since I know you better than anyone else, I know that

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you would never care one minute what I believe. So why would I ask you to go to my church?"

"I don't know. Call me curious, I guess."

"Curious? About what? Faith? God?"

Dragon held up his non-popsicle holding hand and said, "No, you're right about that stuff. I don't care about any of that. In fact, and you might find this hard to believe, I don't just believe there is a god, I *know* there is a god. But he doesn't interest me."

"But the church does? You are interested in church, but not God? What? Why?"

"Like I said, I'm curious."

Viper was trying to figure out where this was headed, "So let me see if I have this straight. I believe in God, and that he exists; meaning, I put my trust in him. But you, you don't believe in God, but you *know* that he exists."

"Correct."

"So you also believe in the spiritual realm; things such as angels and demons, Heaven and Hell."

"Correct again. But like you said, I don't believe they exist, Vipe, I know they exist."

"Am I missing something?"

"No. You're not. They exist. But I don't care."

"But you do care about my church."

"Yes."

"It's only a building."

"Maybe. I don't know. I've never been in one. And you have. So my friend, someday I would like you to invite me to your church. I want to see what it is that inspires my friend to ruin a perfectly cool

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T-shirt." (Dragon was referring to Viper's shirt that they picked up on the way home from one of their many ski trips in northern Michigan)

"Like as in…, come along with me to church this Sunday?"

Dragon quickly responded, "No, no, no. Nothing like that. Yikes. I couldn't handle all of that. Just the thought of that makes me want to hurl. All I want is to see is what it looks like on the inside; without all the happy freaks. Sorry, no offense."

Viper responded, "None taken." And then he added, "But even if there is no church service going on, there are always people there. People have jobs to do throughout the week; you know."

"Not at night," Dragon supplied.

"At night the doors are locked and I don't have a key. Those are for important people. I'm just a member."

"Viper, I'm ashamed of you. Don't sell yourself short. You are my friend. And I am significant. Thus, that makes you important."

Viper didn't know what Dragon meant about being important. But in light of what he just told him about knowing that God, Heaven, angels, demons, and all other things spiritual existed; Viper didn't want to know who or what Dragon was important to. So he said, "Thanks. But the doors will still be locked if I am important or not."

"Since when has that stopped us before?"

"No way, Dragon. I'm not breaking into my church."

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"You don't have to. Just come up with a reason for you to be there when nobody else is around. Tell them you want to fix something or deliver something. Or something like that. You are well liked there; I'm sure. And if they are anything like you, which I suppose they are, they won't question your motives one bit."

"I don't know Dragon. It would be lying."

"Since when is that a problem for you?"

Viper started to protest, but Dragon quickly interrupted, "I'm just kidding. Geesh, sensitive are we? Okay, so don't lie. Surely, it shouldn't be too hard to think of a reason to be at your church off hours."

Thoughts and emotions were swirling in Vipers head. So he prayed, "God, what is this all about?"

God answered Vipers prayer, and he felt an immediate peace wash over him. But Viper wasn't sure if the accompanying reason to be in church off hours came from God or not. So he prayed again and said, "Lord, I trust you. If this is your will, then let it be done." Viper felt more confident this time as he answered his friend, "Okay, but it is going to take a few days."

"No rush."

Later that evening, Viper needed to talk to a friend. "Hey, Viper. What's up?"

"Am I calling you too late? Hope you weren't in bed yet."

"What? No. Are you kidding. It's not 2 AM yet.

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Now, if it were, then there would be a good chance that I would be asleep. But not always. Sometimes I stay up past two."

"Oh, okay, good; I guess. Well, then do you mind if I stop by? I guess that I could have talked to you tomorrow, but I wanted to get your opinion about this, while it was still fresh in my head."

"Yeah, sure, no problem. Is everything all right?"

"Sure. I just wanted to run something by you. It has something to do with church."

"And you thought a new convert would be able to help? I'm flattered, Viper, but I'm sure the guys at church could answer whatever it is you want to ask me, a lot better than I can."

"No! I mean…, no. No one else can know about this, Eddie."

"Okay…., now you have me curious."

Viper thought, "Oh, there's that word again." Then he said to Eddie, "Didn't curiosity kill the cat?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I'll fill you in when I get there."

"Okay, sounds good. I'll see you when I see you."

"Ten minutes tops."

"That's fine," then added, "Ah, do you want me to throw a pizza in the oven?"

The thought of that made Viper's stomach growl. With the events of the day, he totally forgot about eating and was starving. "Sure. That is… if it's not too much trouble."

"Anything for you, friend."

"Cool, see you in a bit."

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After Viper and Eddie ended their call, Eddie's comment came back to him. 'Anything for you…' This made him think about his friend's loyalty. First Dragon told Viper that he would die for him, now Eddie was telling him that he would do anything for him. The idea of two friends, two very different friends, for two very different reasons, would do *anything* for him. "Why?" He thought. Then he prayed the same question to God, "Lord. What is it about me that I am surrounded by friends that would do anything for me? Would I do anything for them too? Would I be willing to die for Dragon? For Eddie?"

As Viper contemplated this and asked God what he thought about it, he grabbed his keys and went out to the car. And as he did, something in the distance caught his eye. It was too dark and too far away to be certain, but he was almost sure that someone was watching him. The feeling of being watched was as equally as strong as the thought that he saw someone watching him. If a car were to go by at the time, he would have had just enough light to make out someone very familiar. He even might have seen the four empty cans from the six-pack, that were on the ground next to him.

Viper did the best he could, to see what may have been there when he drove past. But it was too dark. Whatever it was that he thought was there, was nowhere in sight. So, he did the best he could to put it out of his mind as he drove to Eddie's. When

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he got there, out of habit, Viper rang the door bell. But when his friend came to the door, wearing an oven mitt on each hand, scolding him for not letting himself in, he felt silly. "Sorry. I know. You've told me a hundred times that I should let myself in; sorry. So, is that pizza I smell?"

"Probably not. I just put it in. The oven has to warm up you know."

"Well, yeah, duh," Viper said trying to laugh off the awkwardness of his late night arrival.

Eddie tossed the oven mitts on the counter and asked his friend if he wanted something to drink.

"Water's fine."

"We have plenty of that. Have a seat."

Eddie opened the fridge and got out a bottle of water, walked it over to Viper, and as he handed it to him, he asked, "So, now that you got me out of bed, what's this all about?"

"Out of bed? You said that you weren't sleeping."

"Dude, chill out. I was just kidding. Geesh."

"Oh. Great."

"So?"

"Oh. Ah, well, I wanted to ask you what you thought about something Dragon asked me earlier today."

"Dragon?"

"Yeah. I had the oddest conversation with him earlier today."

"About?"

"He wanted to know why I've never invited him to church."

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Eddie was about to open the oven door, but swung around quickly, and asked, "Are you serious? He wants to go to church."

"Well, not exactly?"

"Wait. What? What's that supposed to mean? I thought that you just said that he asked you about going to church."

"Yeah, I thought the same thing when I first heard the question. But he clarified it for me; he didn't want to go to a church service, just to the church. To the building."

"Why?"

"I know, right? That's what I cannot figure out."

"What does he want to see?"

"I'm not sure."

"What was his reason to go?"

"He said that he was curious."

"Ah, that makes sense."

"It does?"

"Sure, you asked me if curiosity killed the cat. I thought you were saying that in response to what I said."

"Oh, that. I thought you were saying that it made sense for Dragon to be curious."

"No. That still doesn't make sense."

"Well, let me tell you the context of his request."

"Okay, that sounds like a good place to start."

Viper continued to relay the conversation that took place between him and Dragon earlier. And as he did, they ate the pizza and downed a couple bottles of water.

"So that must have been pretty strange."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

"So now what?" asked Eddie.

"Well, that's what I wanted to come to talk to you about. I have a plan."

"A plan? Okay, let's hear it."

After Viper shared his plan with Eddie, he asked him what he thought about it, and if he would be lying to the deacons.

Eddie sat back in his chair and put his hands behind his head, "Well, no, I don't think that you would be lying. I mean, as long as you do what you say that you are going to do there late at night."

"Oh, yeah, absolutely."

"Then I don't see a problem with it."

"No?"

Eddie responded, "No. And I don't think that they would even question you about it."

"Okay. Cool. Then I have one more question for you, but you can say no if you don't want to go."

"Go? Uh-oh. Here it is…."

"*Please*," then Viper remembered what his friend said earlier and called him out on it, "And don't forget, you did tell me that you would do *anything* for me."

Eddie let out a nervous laugh, "Sure. You're right; I did tell you that. So sure, count me in; I'll go."

"That's tight."

"Yeah, tight all right," Eddie said a little less enthusiastic than his friend.

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Viper, wrapping things up told Eddie, "So, now that we have a plan, I'll go ahead and call one of the deacons tomorrow."

Eddie shot back, "Tomorrow?"

"Sure. The sooner we get this over, the better."

"You know, there is one other alternative."

"What's that?"

"Tell Dragon no."

"Oh? Let me know how that goes for you?"

"Me? I'm not telling him no."

"That makes two of us. So, we stick to the original plan?"

"Hmm, I guess. But I am still getting used to the 'we' part."

Viper laughed, "It's going to be fine. We're in; we're out. Boom. No harm, no foul." (Eddie's response of, "Famous last words," would play over and over in both boy's heads in a few weeks)

"Say, Vipe, about Dragon's comment about your shirt; what's the story about that anyway? Why did you get a shirt that said, 'I Saw The Paulding Light?"

Viper laughed, "Well, we use to go skiing in the UP quite a bit. Then one day while we were in the lodge, we overheard a couple of guys talking about some mysterious light near Watersmeet."

"Michigan?"

"Yeah. They call it the Paulding Light. It is this mysterious light that can be seen on the bottom of this hill, but when you get to the top of the hill, it disappears."

"What do you mean?"

"It just disappears. No one knows what happens to it. You can see it from the bottom of the hill, but when you get up to the top of the hill, you can't see it anymore. It's gone. But even though it is gone for you at the top of the hill, to those at the bottom, it is still there."

"Weird."

"Yeah, it's kind of cool actually."

"So, that's why Dragon was upset that you crossed out Paulding?"

"Apparently."

"Yeah, I guess I can see him getting upset about that. I didn't know what you meant by doing that until just recently. And I had no clue what Paulding was supposed to mean in the first place. But I get it now."

"Now that you saw the light?" Viper asked with a big smile on his face.

Eddie thought about what his friend said, then he smiled, "Indeed."

A few days after Dragon's request, the three boys went on a field trip. But neither Viper, Eddie, nor Dragon could see the heavily guarded church when they arrived. Angels of all ranks and size stood ready with swords drawn. But they, along with the two that escorted Viper and Eddie, were given strict orders to allow Dragon and his entourage to enter the church. They weren't happy about it, but orders were orders. Thankfully for the angels, they were spared the knowledge of Dragon's visit. Obedient

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soldiers that they are, they would still have done their mission, and done it well. But they would have been even more on edge if they knew what Dragon and his escorts knew. Therefore, in three weeks, when it was time to commence Dragon's plan, by order of the King, the church would be left unguarded until after Dragon's plan was complete.

But that would all happen soon enough, for now, their orders were to allow the unwanted visitors access to the church without any physical altercation. Although, there orders didn't say that they couldn't get into verbal disputes with the seven demons that escorted Dragon; so they did. The smallest of the demons, the one that was perched atop Dragon's head, received the most insults.

"Hey, little guy, what are you supposed to be, a hat?"

"Nah, he's too small to be a hat, he's more like a beanie."

"I've got bigger hairs in my nostrils than that."

"It must take three of them that size to hold up a sword."

"Sword? Heck, a letter opener, would be too big."

"No wonder you guys lose in the end."

Some of the bigger demons received far more serious threats and insults, but they remained quiet. They knew that going into the church would be no pleasure cruise. Although, painful or not for them to be there, their assignment was simple enough; make sure the favored one is successful in his mission.

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And, in just under ten minutes, Dragon's mission would end up being a success. He saw what he needed to see, which would lead to a chain of events that would scar the community for years to come.

However, Viper and Eddie would not know the true intended purpose behind Dragon's request to *see* the church for another three weeks. And when they would finally find out what was in store for the congregation that morning, there would be nothing they could do about it, but wait; and pray. The pit it left in their stomachs would almost be too much for them to bear. And though they would do their best that they could to scream and pound their feet, nobody would come until it was too late. By then, the unthinkable damage would have already been done when their rescuers would come to their aid; with weapons drawn.

Afterward, if Dragon were still alive, he would have faced the court for his actions. But he wouldn't be. And when Viper thought about it, it saddened him to know that Dragon wasn't lying when he told him that he would die for him.

And though Dragon didn't stand trial in human courts, in Heaven, he was judged by Jesus, and was appointed a hearing with Moses.

Dragon, kidding around with Viper and Eddie said, "Well, I'll be. Now I can cross that off my bucket list."He then continued on with, "I'll have to tell you boys, it was nothing like I was expecting to see."

Eddie asked, "What were you expecting to see?"

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"I don't know. I thought it would be more exciting. It was kind of plain, if you ask me. A bunch of chairs, a podium, a stage, and a cross. Heck, no stained glass windows, no statues, and even the cross was plain. It didn't even have anyone hanging from it. I was kind of disappointed not to see that."

Dragon's comments brought out two different responses.

Eddie's response was more matter of fact, "Those are things that you would see in a Catholic church or some of the other denominations. Our church in nondenominational."

Dragon just shrugged his shoulders, either unconcerned or not understanding the difference.

But Viper's response was more inquisitive as he pressed his friend, "You sure were expecting to see a lot for someone that had never stepped foot in a church."

"I have a television."

"Hmm, I find it hard to believe that you would find watching a church service on television something interesting."

"Well, for your information, it wasn't a church service that I was watching when I saw all those things that your church is lacking. It was on one of those educational channels that showed the history of demons and angels."

Viper shot back, "Ha. I find that even harder to believe. You? You were watching something educational?"

"I found it interesting. Nostalgic like."

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This last comment made Eddie wonder what caused Dragon to feel homesick.

The three boys were now standing at the end of the block from Dragon's apartment, but he had no intention of going home just yet. And when he saw the bus in the distance, he purposely lingered about near the bus stop. As the bus pulled up, Dragon said to Viper and Eddie, "Well boys, it's been a slice, but all of this sightseeing has made me kind of thirsty. I think I'll go check out the party by the lake. I'd invite you boys to come along, but I wouldn't want to take you away from your choir practice or anything like that."

Viper laughed, "Okay, Dragon. You go have your fun. I'm still not sure what this was all about, but I'm glad you had your first church visit. Perhaps now it will be easier for you to join us some Sunday to see what really goes on."

Dragon walked closer to Viper so that they could fist bump and their handshake. "Don't count on it snake boy. But then again, you never know." He looked over to Eddie, smiled, and nodded his head. Eddie was trying to recall a time that Dragon ever smiled at him before. Dragon could tell that his smile caught Eddie off guard, which made him smile all the more. On cue, the bus pulled up, and Dragon boarded.

Eddie looked at Viper, "So, what do you think this was all about, Vipe?"

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"I don't know, Eddie. I don't know."

"Do you think that he is seeking the truth?"

This made Viper laugh so hard that Eddie felt dumb for asking the question. "Let me tell you something, Eddie. I might not know what today's little *curious* filed trip was about, but God does. And trust me when I tell you, whatever it is, I'm pretty sure of one thing, it was not because Dragon is interested in seeking the truth. About the only thing that Dragon seeks is pleasure and chaos. And if he can have both, the happier he would be."

This was the first time that Eddie heard Viper talk negatively about his friend, and sensed that he perhaps witnessed the beginning of the end to their friendship. And just like his question of Dragon's nostalgic comment, this question would be answered soon enough.

During the next two and a half weeks, time flew by. Viper was busy researching: demons, angels, and spiritual warfare. Eddie was busy at work. And Dragon was busy planning a surprise.

Dragon's grandfather grew up in a small town, four hours north from the home that he retired in Racine, and nearby the apartment where Dragon now lived. And like most people that live in small towns in Wisconsin, Dragon's grandfather went fishing. However, he did not use conventional methods during his fishing trips. Dragon's grandfather didn't even own a rod and reel. Why bother with those,

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when his way of fishing was a lot more efficient; and way more fun.

Prior to civilized times, getting your hands on dynamite was not all that hard to do, if you knew where to look. Thus, when Dragon's grandfather and his buddies acquired their first box, they went about experimenting with their new explosives. As it turned out, some things were more fun to blow up than others. But, the most fun they had with the dynamite, was when they went fishing.

The boys found by accident that not only does the exploding dynamite make a huge splash; something else happens. When dynamite is tossed into the water, any fish in the area float to the top. They are not dead, but they are stunned just long enough to scoop them up by hand, or even more efficient, by using nets.

However, when the DNR got word of this, they shut down the boys fishing excursions and confiscated all of their dynamite. All of the dynamite they could find, that is.

After the authorities took what they could find, they left the boys with a strong warning that they would face time in jail for any future excursions. So, the boys heeded their warnings and no longer went fishing. They divvied up the contents of the undiscovered box between those that were willing to take the risk of getting caught.

Of the five boys, Dragon's grandfather was one of them. And so, years later when he moved to Racine, he took his share of the dynamite with him, and hid

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it deep inside the cellar walls of his home. There they stayed, undiscovered and forgotten. Until one day when Dragon was at his grandfather's home, looking for his own hiding place for something that he too did not want to be found by the authorities.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Dragon spoke aloud after he made the discovery. And though he didn't know what to do with it at the time, he knew that whatever he decided to use it for was going to be grand. If he had made the discovery three years earlier, Viper would have been part of the decision. Yet, oddly enough, even though Viper wasn't there to discuss what to do with the dynamite, he was still involved. Because, ever since Viper's conversion, his faith got in the way of Dragon's fun. And nobody was more to blame for Viper's changed life, than his church. Dragon thought about it many times, that Viper's church stole his friend from him and made him into something that he despised. For that, they would pay; dearly.

Three days before Dragon executed his plan, Viper got the surprise of his life; or so he thought. The one that was yet to come was even bigger.

"Hello? Oh, hey, Dragon what's up?"

"What day do you usually go to church?"

"What do you mean, usually?"

"Okay, let me rephrase that. What day do you go to church?"

"I go to church on Sundays, like most people. But

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you already know this. So why are you asking me what day I go to church, Dragon?"

"Nervous, I guess."

"Nervous? What have you ever been nervous about?"

"Lots of things. But that's not why I'm calling."

"Okay, then why are you calling, Dragon?"

"Remember how I asked you to invite me to your church?"

"Yes, how can I forget, it was just a few weeks ago."

"Right, and you know how you asked me if I wanted to go to a church service with you?"

Viper was wondering where this was going, "Yes, I remember. So what? What about it?"

"So, I would like for you to ask me again."

"What? You've already seen inside my church. Why would you need to go again?"

"No, silly. Stop making this hard on me." After saying this, Dragon coughed a couple of times.

"Making what hard on you? Dragon, what are you talking about?"

"I want to go to church with you."

Viper took away the phone from his ear and stared at it. Then he asked his friend, "You want what?"

"Don't play dumb, Viper. You heard me. Ask me, before I change my mind."

"Okay, Dragon. Would you like to go to church with me this Sunday?"

"Why yes, I would. I thought you would never ask."

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"Wait. What? You want to go to church with me this Sunday? Is it some kind of joke? Because, I don't get it if it is."

"No. It's not a joke, Viper." (Dragon coughed a few more times) "The thing is, at first I was curious to see what the inside of your church looked like. Then, after the visitation, I was even more curious to see what a service was like." Dragon knew Viper since childhood, so he figured he wouldn't buy it right away. Therefore, he needed a little more persuasion. "Viper, I've wanted to tell you this for such a long time, but I didn't know how."

"Tell me what, Dragon?"

"I have been throwing up blood for the last month."

Viper didn't know what to say to this, so he stayed silent.

"I went to the doctor about it."

"The doctor?"Viper asked his friend. Then he thought to himself, "Dragon must be sick if he went to a doctor. He's even been known to give himself his own stitches."

"I know, right? But Viper, I'm scared. The doctor says I'm dying. Soon. Real soon."

"Dragon, are you telling me the truth?"

"Unfortunately, my friend, I am. The doctor says that I have about six weeks to live; maybe less."

"Six weeks to live?" Viper echoed his friend. "I don't get it; you seem so healthy. How could you be sick?"

"Well, if you call coughing up blood healthy, then I am in tip top shape."

"Dragon, I don't know what to say. If this is not a joke, then I'm so sorry. I cannot imagine you being sick. Why didn't you tell me? Hang on, I am going to come over."

"No. No, don't do that. I'm not having a good day today, Viper. I don't want you to see me like this."

"I don't care about that. I'm still coming over."

"Serious, Viper." (more coughs) "Don't come over. I need rest."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive, my friend. I'm going to rest for the next couple of days. And then on Sunday, you can come over to bring me to your church. I am kind of weak, so you will need to bring Eddie along too. It'll take the both of you to help me." Dragon was itching to end the call because he didn't want Viper to get suspicious. "Viper, I have to let you go. I will see you Sunday." (cough) "What time will you be here?"

"Church starts at 10:00. We will be there at 9:40."

Just to make sure that Viper was buying it, Dragon asked him, "What should I wear?"

"Whatever makes you comfortable, Dragon."

"Okay, I'll wear a vest."

"A vest? Do you even own a vest?"

Dragon was grinning pretty heavily now, "Oh, sure I do. It's a nice one too. You'd like it. It has some pretty explosive colors." Dragon coughed some more and told Viper he needed to rest.

When they hung up, Viper was disturbed. The thought of his invincible friend being sick was

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inconceivable to him. Dragon, on the other hand, went about finishing his project.

Viper spent the rest of the day thinking about this. He didn't know what to make of Dragon's comment about him owning a vest with explosive colors. So he just figured it was Dragon's way to act casual. But to be on the safe side, he prayed. "Lord, I don't know what to think about my friend's phone call. But you do. So, I lift him up to you. All I have ever wanted is to be your obedient soldier. So, whatever you will have me do, I will do it for you. Let your will be done in my life, and always. And, Lord, if it would be your will, please use Dragon's sickness to bring him to his knees, so that he may call upon you as Lord. "

A little while later, Dragon was finished with his project. As he held it up, he said aloud, "There, I wasn't lying, Viper old pal; I do have a vest. And it is a nice vest, too. People will be *dying* to see it."This got Dragon laughing so hard he was snorting and rolling around on the floor. A normal person would've felt guilty afterward for deceiving their friend, but Dragon was far from normal.

And though Viper prayed, he still didn't have peace. He sat on his bed for a long time trying to picture Dragon sick. It just didn't make sense. He didn't seem sick. And there was no sign of him being sick. So, Viper picked up his phone and dialed Eddie. They talked for a while as they tried to make sense of it.

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"Well, he did cough a few times when we were with him."

"He did?" asked Viper.

"Yeah, sure. He did a couple of times."

"Hmm, I don't remember that. Maybe he is sick."

"Why else would he tell you such a story?

"Why? Because, you would have to know Dragon. He would do something like this in a heartbeat, just because he knew it would upset me."

"That would be pretty mean; don't you think?"

Viper didn't say it, but he thought, "Oh, it would be mean all right, and just up his alley to do something like this." But then he felt bad for doubting his friend.

"What if he really is dying?"

"Well, maybe God is giving him a chance to come to him."

"I don't even know what to say to that, Eddie."

As Eddie and Viper talked, they agreed that if God can save Dragon, he can save anyone. Then they finished their phone call. When they hung up, they both did something by themselves, that they should have done together; they prayed.

On the following Sunday, morning, Viper and Eddie stood outside Dragon's apartment door and knocked. They did not know what to expect, or what they would see inside the apartment. If Dragon were as sick as he said, it could be quite a scene. But when Dragon opened the door to let in his unsuspecting

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visitors, his grinning from ear to ear with a gun in his hand, pointed directly at Eddie and Viper, was the last thing they thought they would see.

Viper asked Dragon, "Dragon, what are you doing? Stop pointing that thing at us before it goes off. Are you okay, dude?"

Dragon snapped back, "Shut it, Viper. Don't make this harder on me than it already is." He stepped back a couple of steps so that the two boys could come in. "Now come in and shut the door."

They did what he told them to do. Then, Dragon walked them to the kitchen, where he had two chairs facing back to back. He made Viper sit down first. Next, he had Eddie, tie Viper to the chair. Then, he had Eddie sit down, so that he could tie Eddie around Viper, and to the chair, that Eddie was sitting in. For the next five minutes, Dragon was busy securing their hands and feet and put duct tape over their mouth.

When they were all secure, Dragon was ready to talk. As he did, he told Viper and Eddie his entire plan. He told them why he wanted to see the layout of the church. He told Viper that he wasn't lying to him earlier, when he said that he would die for him. And since, in Dragon's mind, they already took his friend's life, Dragon had no reason to live. To Eddie, Dragon said, "Personally, I have no need for you. You smell just like Viper. And, it is bad enough that he smells that way."

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Eddie took this to mean that Dragon was about to kill him. However, Dragon explained that the only reason he's not going to kill Eddie, is, he wanted to know that Viper was going to be okay. "And so I figured, since you smell like him, and the two of you like to play church together, out of necessity, you get to live."

During the whole time, Viper and Eddie were squirming in their chairs and as best they could, they tried to communicate to Dragon that he did not have to go through with his plan. But it was of no use. Life just wasn't the same now that Viper was no longer, the same person.

According to Viper, church started at 10:00 in the morning. The clock on the stove read 9:50. "It was time to get the show on the road," thought Dragon.

So, he walked over to the stereo, turned it on, and turned up the volume. He then put on his vest, put a jacket over it, and asked the boys, "How do I look?"

To no avail, the boys did their best to shake their heads. Dragon just smiled at them and said, "Aren't you two a sight." He took out his phone from his pocket and said, "Photo op boys. Say cheese."

The last words that Dragon said to them were, "Don't worry boys. Right before I go into the church, I will call the police and tell them where you are, and I will guarantee them that you had no part in this. That way, you two goody-goodies can go about living your goody-goody life. But as for me, it's my time to check out of here."

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The church was not far from Dragon's apartment, and for all the years that Dragon lived there; it was too close by for his liking. But today, he was glad for the convenience.

After telling the police what he was about to do, he ended the call, and set the phone on the front steps. Dragon opened up the church door, and walked inside. It was now, ten minutes after ten. And as the worship team was leading the congregation in a song about seeing Jesus, nobody tried to stop Dragon, as he walked up to the front of the stage with his hands high in the air and said in a loud voice, his last words, "Your wish is my command."

Tears streamed down their faces when they heard the distant boom. Even over the loud stereo, they could hear the deep rumble of explosives. Millions of questions ran through their head. And for the next 40 minutes, that's all that happened. Questions. No answers; just questions. But all of that came to an end when they started to hear the squad cars arriving one after another. Their hearts were racing with anticipation. They had no clue just exactly what to expect when the officers would enter the apartment, and even less of a clue what Dragon told them. However, in a little while, many of their questions were about to be answered. But by that time, it would no longer be their questions that they had to worry about.

Inside, Jimmy Hendrix was belting out the chorus of, *Purple Haze*. Outside, the sounds of boots from

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officers running, and automatic rifles rattling in the hands belonging to the men and woman wearing the boots, was enough to bring anyone to prayer. So, Viper and Eddie did just that. But their prayer was interrupted by the sounds of shouting from very angry and very scared men and woman with guns. Adrenaline was flying through their veins, and the whirlwind that it was creating was about to collide with the two bound occupants inside.

As the tensions outside were starting to rise, Viper and Eddie could hear that not all of the voices, from the officers were in agreement with one another. There seemed to be quite the confusion as to protocol and the concern or lack of concern for additional bombs.

Therefore, the first thing they did was to agree to get everybody else in the apartment building, outside. Yet, even with automatic weapons in hand, this took a little bit of time, because being that it was Sunday, most people were sleeping in. And since they had to live in the same building as Dragon and his loud music playing neighbor just above him, tuning out loud noises was something the other tenants grew accustomed to.

And, being that only a few people were either at work or church, most everyone was home. So, this took a lot longer than they had hoped. But it also allowed tempers to die down slightly. Once everyone was outside, and they had time to think properly, the officers were able to come to an agreement on a protocol.

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Eddie could see several officers peering in the window. They had some type of mirror attached to big metal rods.

The next 35 minutes were a blur to everyone except Eddie and Viper. But now that the officers were certain that there were no booby-traps, down came the door. With weapons drawn in their direction, Eddie and Viper did exactly what they were told. They froze. But then again, being tied up to a chair, what else could they do?

Little by little things quieted down. Eddie and Viper went from being bound to a chair to bound in handcuffs. They were then taken to the police station for questioning.

When every single question was asked, by every single person asking it, several times, and several times again; Viper and Eddie were cleared of any wrongdoing or involvement. Thus, when it was all said and done, seven hours later, Viper and Eddie were allowed to go home.

Unable to sleep, unable to cry, and unable to pray, Viper called Eddie.

"Hello? Viper, that you?"

"Eddie? You sound different. You sound, drunk. Have you been drinking?"

"No, just I was. Nobody else."

"Eddie! Hold it together man. I know it's hard,

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and we have gone through hell today, but keep it together. You have to remain strong."

"No, yeah, I hears yous."

"Eddie, where did you get the alcohol?"

"No, I don't need any mores. No thanks yous."

"Eddie, listen to me. Stop drinking."

"Too lates. It's all gone. Someone dranks it all."

"Eddie… Eddie, hold in there man."

"Oh, I'm holding all rights. Holdings and spinning's. And spinning, and holdings. And, oh, I don't feel so good."

Viper heard a loud thud as Eddie dropped the phone. Moments later he heard some awful sounds coming from the bathroom, and then the sounds of the toilet flushing; twice.

Moments later, Viper could hear Eddie near his phone, so he started shouting, "Eddie! Eddie! You there? Are you okay?"

Feeling a little more cohesive, Eddie looked at the floor and saw his phone. He picked it up and said, "Hello?"

"Eddie, are you all right, dude?"

"Viper, is that you?"

"Hi, Eddie. Feeling better?"

"I'm sorry, Viper. Don't be mad at mes."

"Mad? I'm not mad. What we went through today would make any normal person do what you did. But, Eddie, you and I, we are not normal. We belong to Christ. And as such, we are called to live our lives different than what the world considers normal."

"Sorry."

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"I know you are. The reason I called is, I couldn't sleep, and I tried to pray, but I couldn't. So, I thought that together, we could call upon the Lord. But, how about this, why don't you listen as I pray. Okay?"

"God's not mad at me?"

"Eddie, listen to me. God is *not* mad at you. And he is not disappointed in you, Eddie. He knows that we will be disappointed in ourselves enough when we do dumb things and don't make better choices. But, He is a jealous God and wants us to turn to Him during times like these, not some bottle. However, he understands our weakness, and he is here to help us make better decisions. He calls us to a higher standard than to give into the ways of the world. Alcohol and drugs are not the answer, Eddie. Trust me, I've been there. They don't solve the problem; they only prolong it. Only God has the solution to your problem and can give you peace and healing; something that we both need right now. And not just us, Eddie, there is a whole church, and community that is hurting right now. It would be easy for us to give up and give into hiding from them, and from God. And that, Eddie, that is exactly what the enemy wants us to do."

"Okay. You right. We should pray. I, uh, well you pray, and I listen. "

Viper smiled. It was the first time that he smiled since he woke up Sunday morning. It was now a little past, 1:00 AM, Monday morning. He lost a lot yesterday, they both did; Many people did. But now, right now, it was all he could do to find enough

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strength to get through this moment and for the next five minutes. And the next five minutes after that, and so on. It would be all God or nothing. There was no way he had any strength of his own to pray. To heal. To forgive. To forget. If God wasn't doing it, it wasn't getting done.

"Ready to pray, Eddie?"

"Ready, Viper."

When the sun rose in the morning sky, Viper was still praying. Although, he wasn't sure if Eddie made it through the entire time or if he nodded off. But every once in a while he would hear Eddie whisper, 'amen'. And though neither of the boys could see it, they both had mighty warriors with arms around them as they spent the night; praying.

It goes without saying, that this was an extremely difficult time for Viper and Eddie, but the guilt they lived with would eventually subside. Viper, however, felt far worse than Eddie over this. After all, it was his childhood friend that caused such devastation. And he was now dead. Along with the destruction of his church, and over one hundred church members, including the pastor, worship team, and the choir, was either dead or severely wounded.

No criminal charges were brought against Viper or Eddie, but some of the church members were less eager than the majority to excuse them of their poor judgment. Still, even amongst those that harbored the most resentment toward Viper and Eddie, they

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were able to put this behind them as God revealed to them times in their life that they did far more foolish things than allowing a friend to see the inside of a church.

During this entire time, God had shown himself faithful to Viper, Eddie, the church, and the community. Nobody died from the broken hearts that they thought that they were going to die from.

Meanwhile, as the news crews came from around the country to carry the story, the biggest news story since 911, the police, town officials, and church members never mentioned Viper nor Eddie's name; not even once.

It was the first suicide bombing in this country. And with it, came lots of questions and side stories. People from across the country made their way to their little corner of the world to help rebuild a new church, a new community, and a new hope for a new future.

Report after report, and interview after interview, would reveal the strength and power of the Christian resolve to unite. Hell would not prevail. And God's kingdom would not fail.

By the spring of the following year, a new church building, with a new name stood on the site of one of the country's worst tragedies. The name on the sign in front of the church indicated that life would continue and hope would survive.

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During this time of healing and rebuilding, Viper grew in wisdom. The luxury of hindsight helped Viper to become more prudent as he learned the value that sometimes you just have to say no, and not go with the flow; especially when the flow was in opposition to God's word. Viper also learned many lessons from remaining friends with Dragon. One such lesson, was, he needed to learn to count the cost. Even when the adults didn't speak into Viper's life, he still felt that he did not exercise wisdom or caution by remaining friends with Dragon. Or the very least, to allow Dragon to have such a heavy influence on him. Viper learned that it was far better to fear God, than to fear man. And thus, even if he didn't know to what degree of evil Dragon was capable of, he still knew that he was evil and should not have been trusted.

Another lesson Viper learned was, he needed to learn safe friendship boundaries. Dragon was a manipulator, and Viper knew it. As a Christian, he should have been more guarded in what was sacred to him. Therefore, in the future, when relationships needed to end, he learned to end them, and end them well.

The passing of time also allowed him to evaluate his convictions and his walk. He would tell himself that if he could have done it all over, things certainly would have been different. However, Viper never entirely blamed himself for what Dragon had done to his church. He knew that he could not control God's will. He also knew that Dragon was bent on

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destruction. It was his purpose in life. Viper had no doubts in his mind, that if it wasn't his church, it would've been another church.

And so, while Viper was learning his many lessons, and Eddie was growing in his faith, in Heaven, a hearing was about to begin. But it would not be like most other hearings, because Dragon, the accused, was not like most other accused. He was a high ranking citizen of Hell. And Judge Moses was eager to move his hearing along, so that Dragon could check out and go home.

Two years after the horrific event, the youth group leaders would take the New Hope Community Church, high school youth group on a field trip to Six Flags. And if you listened real close, above all the screams, music, the sounds of roller coasters roaring by, and all of the other sounds of an amusement park, you could hear one of the youth group leaders say, "Don't look down; don't look down."

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Dragon's Hearing

Once known as Viper, Scott Preston (but whom like everyone else, had a new name in Heaven) now stood in one of Heaven's furthest squares from the castle; The Oasis. The scene in this particular square was a familiar scene throughout Heaven, where ongoing happy reunions took place; all the time.

And, very soon, another reunion would take place in one of Heaven's courtrooms. The buzz in that courtroom was intensified for Dragon's hearing. But not because his, was a high profile hearing, though indeed it was a high profile hearing, the intensity was in response to the witness; King Jesus.

And since Scott's memory had already been wiped clean of Dragon, he didn't even know that the hearing was under way. He was too busy checking out the parks and gardens while reacquainting with old friends, and making new ones. There was too much to explore and too many friends and new faces to meet for him to care about such things as hearings.

"Pastor Eddie!! How great it is to see you, friend."

Eddie and Scott embraced for the first time in their perfect state and glorified bodies. They both had crowns atop their heads and wore long flowing robes.

"This place blows away any thought of what I imagined it would be like. How absolutely stunning!"

"Glorious my friend! Truly, glorious."

Scott then spotted someone he recognized, "Sabrina! How wonderful it is to see you again."

"Scott? Is that you? I didn't recognize you without your Diddly T-shirt."

"Oh, I loved that shirt. The King gave me many opportunities to share his love when I wore that shirt."

Prince Eddie chimed in, "My favorite was the, I hear voices shirt."

"True; true. I got in a lot of witnessing with that one as well. Sabrina, this is Pastor Eddie, my dearest friend."

"Hello, Eddie, it's nice to meet you." Sabrina then looked up at Eddie's crown and commented, "Nice crown. I see that you and Scott have the same stone on top. What did you two do to earn that?"

Eddie and Scott looked at one another and then back to Sabrina. They said together, "That's a long story."

"Well, I was on my way to see a prince named Darren. He was my earthly husband. Walk with me, and you can tell me the story."

"Wonderful."

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"Let's do it. I'm looking forward to meeting Prince Darren."

All around them many similar conversations were taking place. As men and woman who were once married, found one another. And they were joined by those who were at one time their earthly children. Friends, neighbors, relatives, and people that they didn't know on earth but were instrumental in their conversions; all gathered in a celebration of pure joy and happiness. They danced. They sang. And they pointed in every direction at all the wondrous sights that they saw.

There were gardens galore, waterfalls, and things without earthly names. And there were mansions everywhere. Many mansions; too many to number and they came in all shapes and sizes. But unlike their counterparts on earth, these mansions were breathtakingly beautiful, and each one was superbly unique.

Not too far away from The Oasis, in a mansion that belonged to a woman, formally known as Janice, several friends had a drink that was similar to tea, with their angels. Noel's angel recalled the events in Heaven when he was given the mission to allow the enemy to whisper the insults of Steve's name into her ear. And now, in the same mansion, Steve and Dylan were busy whirling about the swords that belonged to their angels. There was no need for forgiveness of the events that took place

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on earth. For each understood perfectly how God used all of the actions they did or did not do to fulfill his perfect will. So now, they were not only friends; they were fellow heirs of the Kingdom. And as such, they talked about the events from earth and marveled how intrinsic the plans were that needed to be orchestrated just so, in the manner that would cause a chain of events to get the right two people together at just the precise time. And they marveled how God mercifully used a hideous crime (earthly speaking) to restore the relationship of Creator and creation by the saving grace of his Son.

Behind Janice's mansion, in a building much closer to the castle, Dragon said his last words until the end of his hearing, "Let's get this freak show moving, I've got some serious partying to do."

Judge Moses had heard enough. It didn't matter whom he belonged to; behavior of this kind was not allowed in his courtroom, especially when the King was present.

"Outbursts like these are not permitted. Neither I nor anyone else in this court, especially our honored guest and witness for this hearing, will stand for this folly. And by the looks of things, you are not as important to your family as you thought."

Moses was addressing the fact, that, though they were prepared for them, no unwanted visitors tried to attend today's hearing. Although, Moses and the guards were apprehensive, and would remain that

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way until Dragon's sentence was carried out, and the door was shut.

Ever since Lucifer's visit while discussing Job with God, Moses did not care for him or any of his minions walking the streets of Heaven.

Moses, unsure if an attack could take place in Heaven, took the necessary precautions. When asked if such attacks would be allowed in Heaven, Jesus would smile and say to him, do what you feel you need to do.

Therefore, they kept Dragon on a short leash with swords drawn. The hush plate they put on him had a metal strip that acted like a tongue suppressor, prevented the accused from speaking. It had air holes over his mouth and nose and it was made of steel, formed specifically to fit his face. The chain attached to the hush plate connected to the brace around Dragon's neck. And the chains attached to that were tightly held by a guard on either side.

There were three heavily armed guards behind them, and they were flanked with as many guards at both sides. In all, there was close to five hundred guards in the courtroom building, and nearly two thousand outside. In addition to these guards, Heaven's army was on standby.

Other than that, things were just about normal in the courtroom. After all, high profile case or not, each case was the same. Although, with an appearance from the King, additional cherubs were flying about singing loudly their praises. The only time they didn't sing or chant was when the

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hush plate was installed on Dragon's face. During that time, they went from chanting, "Long live the King" to "Hush. Hush. Hush. Hush." But as soon as the last strap on the hush plate was tightened, they reverted back to, "Jesus, King Jesus, Long Live King Jesus…"

"All right. Now that there will be no more interruptions from the accused, let me continue." Moses picked back up the paper that he held in his hand prior to Dragon's outburst. "As I was saying, in accordance with the authority of Yahweh, it is the duty of this court to administer justice to Wade Brackston, also known as, Dragon. The sentencing that you will receive, that King Jesus has determined appropriate for your punishment for your unbelief and the evil that you committed while living on earth, will be handed out immediately following this hearing."

Moses paused for a moment as he wrote something. Then he continued, "Mr. Brackston, you are here today for your hearing and sentencing of eternal damnation. However, unlike the majority of the guests that stand before this court, you, I am sure are quite aware of what awaits you. And thus, the required readings of your eternal punishment will be exempted from this hearing."

If Dragon were able to move or make any other sounds than that of gargling and swallowing, he would have been quite animated. But things being as they were, he just stood there; waiting.

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With that said, Judge Moses looked at Jesus and asked if he wanted to say anything further in this regard. Jesus said nothing as he took his left hand and waved it slightly angled, as one does when they are shooing away a pest.

"Okay, very well. Thank you my King." Moses then picked up another piece of evidence from his desk. Then he spoke, "During this point of the hearing, I announce to the court that we will now view portions of the accused earthly life with their witness. Being that you are standing in as witness for today's hearing, would you, my Lord, allow the court to present the evidence?"

Jesus smiled and nodded to his friend Moses.

"Thank you my Lord." Moses, then motioned to someone sitting at a desk, "You may play the first scene."

Scene after scene played for all to see from the life of Viper and Dragon. It showed the angels that protected Viper during their dangerous stunts and lawless deeds. It also showed what guided and protected Dragon. And, like all of the other court hearings, when one hologram ended, Moses would write something; then the next one would play. Furthermore, just like all the court hearings, after the last piece of evidence was shown, the holograms came no more.

Moses wrote something down, looked over to Jesus, and asked if he would like to add anything,

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clarify anything, or just simply address the court. Jesus spoke, "I do, Judge Moses."

Jesus stood and walked down to the courtroom floor. When he got there, he stretched out his arms and held out his hands, palms facing inward, then said something in a language that was only understood by Moses and a few high ranking guards. And similar to a magic trick on earth, a smaller version of the courts holograms hovered about in front of Jesus.

Then for the second time during the hearing, Jesus spoke. When he was finished talking, the time that it would have taken if measured by earth time, would have been roughly 30 years.

Jesus then spoke in the unfamiliar language, once again. At that moment, the hologram turned into a key. The key just hovered about in front of Jesus; spinning slowly. He talked about the key for another 40 earth years. Next the key turned into a book. And as Jesus read from the book, another 25 earth years would pass. When he was finished speaking, the book disappeared.

Jesus then stepped forward and stopped four feet in front of Dragon. He spoke, and as he did, the chains and hush plate were gone. The guards looked at one another; nervously. Jesus assured them it would be all right and that they could stand to the side.

They did as they were told.

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Then Jesus made a motion with his hand and a door appeared. He spoke the words, "Edith Brackston, come forth."

The door opened, and in walked Dragon's earthly mother. She was dressed in a black and red robe. In her hands, she held one similar to hers and offered it to her son. He took it, put in on and smiled at his mother.

"How do I look?"

"Like my son," Dragon's mother said smiling.

They were about to embrace, but Jesus waved his hand, and they froze in place. Then for the next 60 earth years, he addressed mother and son. In the end, they bowed to Jesus, and said that they understood.

At this point, Jesus looked up to Moses and said, "Judge Moses, faithful friend of the kingdom, I turn this hearing back over to you."After saying this, Jesus turned to his left and walked to the door. It opened on its own, and once he stepped through the doorway; the door shut.

Since Moses did not have the power to remove chains, and call people up from Hell, he ordered the chains to be replaced around Dragon's wrists and ankles, and then ordered the guards to stand alert.

Once the chains were tightly fashioned, Moses finished the proceedings as he had done countless times before by reading from the book of life. After closing the book, he announced, "Wade Brackston,

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your name is not written in, *The Book of Life*. Therefore, this hearing is now over."

Moses stood and grinned because he knew how much this would torment the accused, "But, before you leave our company, we have one more demand." Moses told the guard to prepare the accused. But what happened next was unexpected; Dragon kneeled on his own and voluntarily said the required words of all of the departed, "Jesus Christ is Lord and King." Then he added, "Long live the King." His smile afterward had no effect on Moses. Instead, he just smiled in return and told him it was his pleasure to serve justice.

Moses looked at two of his highest ranking guards, and gave them the order to escort Dragon, and his mother to the sentencing room.

When they got to the door, the guards removed his remaining chains, and they opened the door. Hand in hand, mother and son walked through the doorway. As they did, Dragon gave out a loud cheer, smiled, and said, "Daddy, I'm home."

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Epilogue

WHEN SHE FINISHED THE BOOK, Shari looked back at the cover and smiled once more. As she sat there thinking about the story, she marveled how her husband captured moments from their marriage and family, and brought them to life in his book. Her smile turned into a giggle when she thought, "So, my husband thinks that I like to go boot shopping. Well, I'll have to do something about that while I am in London. After all, I wouldn't want to disappoint him."

As Shari sat in her seat, she couldn't wait until she landed. Calling her husband was always the first thing she did after landing. But this time, the conversation wouldn't merely be centered on her safe arrival or how much she missed him. This phone call would be about the book. She had many questions for him. She wanted to ask him about the different characters; especially Janice, Noel, and Sabrina. As she read, Shari wondered if his inspiration for the three characters came from a blend of personalities between her, her cousin, and a friend of theirs. And

she also wanted to know if her suspicion was correct, that Viper was his alter ego.

So now, missing her husband more than ever, she closed her eyes and prayed. And as she did, she hoped as people read his book, they too would be encouraged and inspired to share their faith with the people that God brought into their lives. And that they would recognize the many doors of opportunities he provided.

However, reading made her quite tired, and as a result, it wasn't long until she drifted off to sleep. As Shari slept, she would dream about many things, but mostly she would dream about walking on streets of gold. And as the images of Heaven consumed her dreams, she was abruptly awakened.

Blame turbulence on the bump to Shari's funny bone, but there was nothing funny about the drink cart slamming into her elbow.

"Ouch."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"I am, but my funny bone isn't."

The flight attendant grimaced; Shari smiled.

When Shari asked the flight attendant where they were, the flight attendant's normal response to this question would have been, "On an airplane, silly." But being that her beverage cart just slammed into one of her passengers, she felt that a more appropriate response was in order.

"Just about an hour out of London."

Shari looked up at the flight attendant's name tag, "Oh, good. Thank you Angelica."

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Angelica asked Shari, "Are you sure your elbow is fine? Would you like some ice?"

"No, I'm fine. Ice isn't necessary. Although, I could go for a Coke."

"Sure thing. It's on the house."

Shari smiled, again.

"One inch to the left and the cart would have missed you completely."

"Almost, but not quite," Shari responded as she thought how coincidental this conversation was between her and Angelica.

Angelica was flabbergasted with her passengers' response, "Did you get what you just said from a line in a book?"

Shari dug into her bag and held up her husband's book, "You mean this one?"

"Yes! You read it?"

"Well, I kind of had to read it. My husband wrote it."

"Whoa, back up the bus, we need to talk. Then that means your son-in-law gave me the book that I read. I saw him reading it the other day on a flight to New York. And when I asked him if it were any good, he said that he liked it. But then he went on to say that he was biased, because his father-in-law wrote it. He told me his favorite part was a section in the book that mentioned his wife's favorite movie."

Shari laughed and said, "How funny. What are the chances of us meeting? It's almost like we were meant to meet."

Angelica smiled, "Well, I have to finish serving drinks, but can we talk a little more about the book?"

"Sure, I'd love to," Shari told Angelica.

Twenty minutes later, Angelica stopped by to talk with Shari about the book.

"I am going to be held over in London for three days. Will you be available to meet for coffee sometime in the next three days?"

"Absolutely," said Shari. And then she gave Angelica a business card, and told her to give her a call.

"I certainly will. It is nice to meet you, Shari."

"Same here, Angelica."

Sitting in front of a Starbucks, two days after Shari's encounter with Angelica's drink cart, the two ladies talked about the book.

"I cannot believe I'm actually talking to the wife of the author, whose book that I just read."

Smiling, "Well, it is hard getting used to the idea myself."

"So, Shari, I want to ask you, do you believe the things that happened in the book are true?"

"Meaning what? Is God and Heaven real?"

"Well, not just that, but the other stuff too."

"Such as?"

"Such as people being sent to Hell because they did not believe in Jesus. I mean, I have to tell you, I was shocked to read that Sandra was sent to Hell. She went to church and did many good things."

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Shari learned years ago that it was best to let people talk out their questions or problems, so she just nodded as Angelica talked. And as she waited for her turn speak, Shari prayed for wisdom.

"I was sure that the author, well, your husband, had Sandra's character sentenced to Hell because she was gay. But he did a convincing job using Moses to explain that her eternal punishment had nothing to do with being gay or being straight."

"I agree. I'm glad you caught that."

"Yeah, well, so my question is, if going to church isn't good enough, do you have to do what Viper's friend did?"Angelica paused as she tried to recall the name of the character.

So, Shari supplied, "Eddie?"

"Yes, Eddie."

"Do you mean pray for salvation?"

"Yes."

"Well, Angelica, it is a lot more than just a onetime prayer. But before I get into that, can I ask you, what do you believe?"

"About God, Heaven, and stuff?"

"Yes."

"Well, being named Angelica, I kind of always thought that I was destined to go to Heaven. You know, because my name is, well, Angelic. And, I'm a good person. So, I figured that if there were such a thing as Heaven in the afterlife, I was sure to get in. Kind of like, it is my destiny."

"Don't tell that to Adam," Shari kidded.

Angelica smiled, "I won't." Then she went on for

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a few more minutes telling Shari what she believed about God and Heaven.

When Angelica was finished, Shari knew where she needed to start; Roman's Road. And as they talked, little by little, Angelica's false understanding about God, Jesus, and salvation was stripped away by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And by God's grace, he allowed Shari to lead Angelica to the knowledge that she was a sinner, and that only Jesus could save her from His judgment and a court date with Moses. And so, just like Eddie, a fictional character, and like millions of people have done throughout the world, Angelica confessed that she was a sinner, and she repented of her sins by asking Jesus to be her Lord and Savior and Best Friend.

Shortly following Angelica's rebirth, she told Shari that she had to be leaving soon because a coworker came down with the flu and could not travel. But before Angelica left, the two ladies exchanged emails and promised to keep in touch.

However, that evening, while watching the news in the hotel lobby, Shari learned two things: One, she would never receive any emails from Angelica because the news reporter said that there were no survivors from the crash of flight 697. And the second thing she learned, by God's grace, he used Shari to get Angelica to open the door to her heart. And by doing so, she would not have to be escorted in chains, to a door in a courtroom somewhere in Heaven.

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About the Author



In 2007, the year America went into the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, Andy Levandowski was graduating from Trinity International University with a degree in Education, looking to enter a workforce that was on a national decline. After teaching for seven years, Andy found himself, like many of his colleagues, without a job as the school he was working for had to shut their doors. With little opportunity for teachers on the horizon, Andy felt led to reinvent himself, and a new door was opened into the literary world. A door that would eventually lead to, And Then Comes Justice. Andy still considers himself to be a teacher, although, his students have

changed, and his classroom is now any place where people can find a comfortable spot to read. If his students like reading, And Then Comes Justice, and wished for a second book that takes their favorite characters on a much different journey, in a much different setting, Andy would tell you, “Me too.”